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THE HUNTED WOMAN

JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD

THE HUNTED WOMAN

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GOD'S COUNTRY—AND THE WOMAN

"Look at MacDonald. . . . It's not the gold, but MacDonald, that's taking me north, Ladygray. . . . Up there, another grave is calling MacDonald."

THE HUNTED WOMAN

BY

JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD

Author of KAZAN, ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY

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TO MY WIFE
AND
OUR COMRADES OF THE TRAIL

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

"'Look at MacDonald. . . . It's not the gold, but MacDonald, that's taking me North, Lady-gray. . . . Up there, another grave is calling MacDonald.'" (See page 144) . . *Frontispiece*

FACING PAGE

A tall, slim, exquisitely poised figure. . . . "'Another o' them Dotty Dimples come out to save the world. I thought I'd help eggicate her a little, an' so I sent her to Bill's place'" 10

"A crowd was gathering. . . . A slim, exquisitely formed woman in shimmering silk was standing beside a huge brown bear" 102

"'The tunnel is closed,' she whispered. . . . 'That means we have just forty-five minutes to live. . . . Let us not lie to one another.'". 200

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CHAPTER I

IT WAS all new—most of it singularly dramatic and even appalling to the woman who sat with the pearl-gray veil drawn closely about her face. For eighteen hours she had been a keenly attentive, wide-eyed, and partly frightened bit of humanity in this onrush of "the horde." She had heard a voice behind her speak of it as "the horde"—a deep, thick, gruff voice which she knew without looking had filtered its way through a beard. She agreed with the voice. It was the Horde—that horde which has always beaten the trails ahead for civilization and made of its own flesh and blood the foundation of nations. For months it had been pouring steadily into the mountains—always in and never out, a laughing, shouting, singing, blaspheming Horde, every ounce of it toughened sinew and red brawn, except the Straying Angels. One of these sat opposite her, a dark-eyed girl with over-red lips and hollowed cheeks, and she heard the bearded man say something to his companions about "dizzy dolls" and "the little angel in the other seat." This same voice, gruffened in its beard, had told her that ten thousand of the Horde had gone up ahead of them. Then it whispered something that made her hands suddenly

tighten and a hot flush sweep through her. She lifted her veil and rose slowly from her seat, as if to rearrange her dress. Casually she looked straight into the faces of the bearded man and his companion in the seat behind. They stared. After that she heard nothing more of the Straying Angels, but only a wildly mysterious confabulation about "rock hogs," and "coyotes" that blew up whole mountains, and a hundred and one things about the "rail end." She learned that it was taking five hundred steers a week to feed the Horde that lay along the Grand Trunk Pacific between Hogan's Camp and the sea, and that there were two thousand souls at Tête Jaune Cache, which until a few months before had slumbered in a century-old quiet broken only by the Indian and his trade. Then the train stopped in its twisting trail, and the bearded man and his companion left the car. As they passed her they glanced down. Again the veil was drawn close. A shimmering tress of hair had escaped its bondage; that was all they saw.

The veiled woman drew a deeper breath when they were gone. She saw that most of the others were getting off. In her end of the car the hollow-cheeked girl and she were alone. Even in their aloneness these two women had not dared to speak until now. The one raised her veil again, and their eyes met across the aisle. For a moment the big, dark, sick-looking eyes of the "angel" stared. Like the bearded man and his companion, she, too, understood, and an embarrassed flush added to the colour of the rouge on her cheeks. The eyes that looked across at her were blue—deep, quiet, beautiful. The

lifted veil had disclosed to her a face that she could not associate with the Horde. The lips smiled at her—the wonderful eyes softened with a look of understanding, and then the veil was lowered again. The flush in the girl's cheek died out, and she smiled back.

"You are going to Tête Jaune?" she asked.

"Yes. May I sit with you for a few minutes? I want to ask questions—so many!"

The hollow-cheeked girl made room for her at her side.

"You are new?"

"Quite new—to this."

The words, and the manner in which they were spoken, made the other glance quickly at her companion.

"It is a strange place to go—Tête Jaune," she said. "It is a terrible place for a woman."

"And yet you are going?"

"I have friends there. Have you?"

"No."

The girl stared at her in amazement. Her voice and her eyes were bolder now.

"And without friends you are going—*there?*" she cried. "You have no husband—no brother——"

"What place is this?" interrupted the other, raising her veil so that she could look steadily into the other's face. "Would you mind telling me?"

"It is Miette," replied the girl, the flush reddening her cheeks again. "There's one of the big camps of the railroad builders down on the Flats. You can see it through the window. That river is the Athabasca."

"Will the train stop here very long?"

The Little Angel shrugged her thin shoulders despairingly.

"Long enough to get me into The Cache mighty late tonight," she complained. "We won't move for two hours."

"I'd be so glad if you could tell me where I can go for a bath and something to eat. I'm not very hungry—but I'm terribly dusty. I want to change some clothes, too. Is there a hotel here?"

Her companion found the question very funny. She had a giggling fit before she answered.

"You're sure new," she explained. "We don't have hotels up here. We have bed-houses, chuck-tents, and bunk-shacks. You ask for Bill's Shack down there on the Flats. It's pretty good. They'll give you a room, plenty of water, and a looking-glass—an' charge you a dollar. I'd go with you, but I'm expecting a friend a little later, and if I move I may lose him. Anybody will tell you where Bill's place is. It's a red an' white striped tent—and it's respectable."

The stranger girl thanked her, and turned for her bag. As she left the car, the Little Angel's eyes followed her with a malicious gleam that gave them the strange glow of candles in a sepulchral cavern. The colours which she unfurled to all seeking eyes were not secret, and yet she was filled with an inward antagonism that this stranger with the wonderful blue eyes had dared to see them and recognize them. She stared after the retreating form—a tall, slim, exquisitely poised figure that filled her with envy and a dull sort of hatred. She did not hear a step behind her. A hand fell familiarly on her shoulder, and a coarse voice laughed something in her ear that made her jump up with an artificial little shriek of pleasure. The man nodded toward the end of the now empty car.

"Who's your new friend?" he asked.

"She's no friend of mine," snapped the girl. "She's another one of them Dolly Dimples come out to save the world. She's that innocent she wonders why Tête Jaune ain't a nice place for ladies without escort. I thought I'd help eggicate her a little an' so I sent her to Bill's place. Oh, my Lord, I told her it was respectable!"

She doubled over the seat in a fit of merriment, and her companion seized the opportunity to look out of the window.

The tall, blue-eyed stranger had paused for a moment on the last step of the car to pin up her veil, fully revealing her face. Then she stepped lightly to the ground, and found herself facing the sunlight and the mountains. She drew a slow, deep breath between her parted lips, and turned wonderingly, for a moment forgetful. It was the first time she had left the train since entering the mountains, and she understood now why some one in the coach had spoken of the Miette Plain as Sunshine Pool. Wherever she looked the mountains fronted her, with their splendid green slopes reaching up to their bald caps of gray shale and reddish rock or gleaming summits of snow. Into this "pool"—this pocket in the mountains—the sun descended in a wonderful flood. It stirred her blood like a tonic. She breathed more quickly; a soft glow coloured her cheeks; her eyes grew more deeply violet as they caught the reflection of the blue sky. A gentle wind fretted the loose tendrils of brown hair about her face. And the bearded man, staring through the car window, saw her thus, and for an hour after that the hollow-cheeked girl wondered at the strange change in him.

The train had stopped at the edge of the big fill overlooking the Flats. It was a heavy train, and a train that was helping to make history—a combination of freight, passenger, and "cattle." It had averaged eight miles an hour on its climb toward Yellowhead Pass and the end of steel. The "cattle" had already surged from their stifling and foul-smelling cars in a noisy inundation of curiously mixed humanity. They were of a dozen different nationalities, and as the girl looked at them it was not with revulsion or scorn but with a sudden quickening of heartbeat and a little laugh that had in it something both of wonder and of pride. This was the Horde, that crude, monstrous thing of primitive strength and passions that was overturning mountains in its fight to link the new Grand Trunk Pacific with the seaport on the Pacific. In that Horde, gathered in little groups, shifting, sweeping slowly toward her and past her, she saw something as omnipotent as the mountains themselves. They could not know defeat. She sensed it without ever having seen them before. For her the Horde now had a heart and a soul. These were the builders of empire—the man-beasts who made it possible for Civilization to creep warily and without peril into new places and new worlds. With a a curious shock she thought of the half-dozen lonely little wooden crosses she had seen through the car window at odd places along the line of rail.

And now she sought her way toward the Flats. To do this she had to climb over a track that was waiting for ballast. A car shunted past her, and on its side she saw the big, warning red placards—DYNAMITE. That one word seemed to breathe to her the spirit of the wonderful energy

A tall, slim, exquisitely poised figure. . . . "Another o' them Dotty Dimples come out to save the world. I thought I'd help eggicate her a little, an' so I sent her to Bill's place. Oh, my Lord, I told her it was respectable!"

that was expending itself all about her. From farther on in the mountains came the deep, sullen detonations of the "little black giant" that had been rumbling past her in the car. It came again and again, like the thunderous voice of the mountains themselves calling out in protest and defiance. And each time she felt a curious thrill under her feet and the palpitant touch of something that was like a gentle breath in her ears. She found another track on her way, and other cars slipped past her crunchingly. Beyond this second track she came to a beaten road that led down into the Flats, and she began to descend.

Tents shone through the trees on the bottom. The rattle of the cars grew more distant, and she heard the hum and laughter of voices and the jargon of a phonograph. At the bottom of the slope she stepped aside to allow a team and wagon to pass. The wagon was loaded with boxes that rattled and crashed about as the wheels bumped over stones and roots. The driver of the team did not look at her. He was holding back with his whole weight; his eyes bulged a little; he was sweating in his face was a comedy of expression that made the girl smile in spite of herself. Then she saw one of the bobbing boxes and the smile froze into a look of horror. On it was painted that ominous word—DYNAMITE!

Two men were coming behind her.

"Six horses, a wagon an' old Fritz—blown to hell an' not a splinter left to tell the story," one of them was saying. "I was there three minutes after the explosion and there wasn't even a ravelling or a horsehair left. This dynamite's a dam' funny thing. I wouldn't be a rock-hog for a million!"

"I'd rather be a rock-hog than Joe—drivin' down this hill a dozen times a day," replied the other.

The girl had paused again, and the two men stared at her as they were about to pass. The explosion of Joe's dynamite could not have startled them more than the beauty of the face that was turned to them in a quietly appealing inquiry.

"I am looking for a place called—Bill's Shack," she said, speaking the Little Sister's words hesitatingly. "Can you direct me to it, please?"

The younger of the two men looked at his companion without speaking. The other, old enough to regard feminine beauty as a trap and an illusion, turned aside to empty his mouth of a quid of tobacco, bent over, and pointed under the trees.

"Can't miss it—third tent-house on your right, with canvas striped like a barber-pole. That phonnygraff you hear is at Bill's."

"Thank you."

She went on.

Behind her, the two men stood where she had left them. They did not move. The younger man seemed scarcely to breathe.

"Bill's place!" he gasped then. "I've a notion to tell her. I can't believe——"

"Shucks!" interjected the other.

"But I don't. She isn't that sort. She looked like a Madonna—with the heart of her clean gone. I never saw anything so white an' so beautiful. You call me a fool if you want to—I'm goin' on to Bill's!"

He strode ahead, chivalry in his young and palpitating

heart. Quickly the older man was at his side, clutching his arm.

"Come along, you cotton-head!" he cried. "You ain't old enough or big enough in this camp to mix in with Bill. Besides," he lied, seeing the wavering light in the youth's eyes, "I know her. She's going to the right place."

At Bill's place men were holding their breath and staring. They were not unaccustomed to women. But such an one as this vision that walked calmly and undisturbed in among them they had never seen. There were half a dozen lounging there, smoking and listening to the phonograph, which some one now stopped that they might hear every word that was spoken. The girl's head was high. She was beginning to understand that it would have been less embarrassing to have gone hungry and dusty. But she had come this far, and she was determined to get what she wanted—if it was to be had. The colour shone a little more vividly through the pure whiteness of her skin as she faced Bill, leaning over his little counter. In him she recognized the Brute. It was blazoned in his face, in the hungry, seeking look of his eyes—in the heavy pouches and thick crinkles of his neck and cheeks. For once Bill Quade himself was at a loss.

"I understand that you have rooms for rent," she said unemotionally. "May I hire one until the train leaves for Tête Jaune Cache?"

The listeners behind her stiffened and leaned forward. One of them grinned at Quade. This gave him the confidence he needed to offset the fearless questioning in the

blue eyes. None of them noticed a newcomer in the door. Quade stepped from behind his shelter and faced her.

"This way," he said, and turned to the drawn curtains beyond them.

She followed. As the curtains closed after them a chuckling laugh broke the silence of the on-looking group. The newcomer in the doorway emptied the bowl of his pipe, and thrust the pipe into the breast-pocket of his flannel shirt. He was bareheaded. His hair was blond, shot a little with gray. He was perhaps thirty-eight, no taller than the girl herself, slim-waisted, with trim, athletic shoulders. His eyes, as they rested on the still-fluttering curtains, were a cold and steady gray. His face was thin and bronzed, his nose a trifle prominent. He was a man far from handsome, and yet there was something of fascination and strength about him. He did not belong to the Horde. Yet he might have been the force behind it, contemptuous of the chuckling group of rough-visaged men, almost arrogant in his posture as he eyed the curtains and waited.

What he expected soon came. It was not the usual giggling, the usual exchange of badinage and coarse jest beyond the closed curtains. Quade did not come out rubbing his huge hands, his face crinkling with a sort of exultant satisfaction. The girl preceded him. She flung the curtains aside and stood there for a moment, her face flaming like fire, her blue eyes filled with the flash of lightning. She came down the single step. Quade followed her. He put out a hand.

"Don't take offence, girly," he expostulated. "Look here—ain't it reasonable to s'pose——"

He got no farther. The man in the door had advanced, placing himself at the girl's side. His voice was low and unexcited.

"You have made a mistake?" he said.

She took him in at a glance—his clean-cut, strangely attractive face, his slim build, the clear and steady gray of his eyes.

"Yes, I have made a mistake—a terrible mistake!"

"I tell you it ain't fair to take offence," Quade went on. "Now, look here——"

In his hand was a roll of bills. The girl did not know that a man could strike as quickly and with as terrific effect as the gray-eyed stranger struck then. There was one blow, and Quade went down limply. It was so sudden that he had her outside before she realized what had happened.

"I chanced to see you go in," he explained, without a tremor in his voice. "I thought you were making a mistake. I heard you ask for shelter. If you will come with me I will take you to a friend's."

"If it isn't too much trouble for you, I will go," she said. "And for that—in there—thank you!"

CHAPTER II

THEY passed down an aisle through the tall trees, on each side of which faced the vari-coloured and many-shaped architecture of the little town. It was chiefly of canvas. Now and then a structure of logs added an appearance of solidity to the whole. The girl did not look too closely. She knew that they passed places in which there were long rows of cots, and that others were devoted to trade. She noticed signs which advertised soft drinks and cigars—always "soft drinks," which sometimes came into camp marked as "dynamite," "salt pork," and "flour." She was conscious that every one stared at them as they passed. She heard clearly the expressions of wonder and curiosity of two women and a girl who were spreading out blankets in front of a rooming-tent. She looked at the man at her side. She appreciated his courtesy in not attempting to force an acquaintanceship. In her eyes was a ripple of amusement.

"This is all strange and new to me—and not at all uninteresting," she said. "I came expecting—everything. And I am finding it. Why do they stare at me so? Am I a curiosity?"

"You are," he answered bluntly. "You are the most beautiful woman they have ever seen."

His eyes encountered hers as he spoke. He had answered her question fairly. There was nothing that

was audacious in his manner or his look. She had asked for information, and he had given it. In spite of herself the girl's lips trembled. Her colour deepened. She smiled.

"Pardon me," she entreated. "I seldom feel like laughing, but I almost do now. I have encountered so many curious people and have heard so many curious things during the past twenty-four hours. You don't believe in concealing your thoughts out here in the wilderness, do you?"

"I haven't expressed *my* thoughts," he corrected. "I was telling you what *they* think."

"Oh-h-h—I beg your pardon again!"

"Not at all," he answered lightly, and now his eyes were laughing frankly into her own. "I don't mind informing you," he went on, "that I am the biggest curiosity you will meet between this side of the mountains and the sea. I am not accustomed to championing women. I allow them to pursue their own course without personal interference on my part. But—I suppose it will give you some satisfaction if I confess it—I followed you into Bill's place because you were more than ordinarily beautiful, and because I wanted to see fair play. I knew you were making a mistake. I knew what would happen."

They had passed the end of the street, and entered a little green plain that was soft as velvet underfoot. On the farther side of this, sheltered among the trees, were two or three tents. The man led the way toward these.

"Now, I suppose I've spoiled it all," he went on, a touch of irony in his voice. "It was really quite heroic of me to follow you into Bill's place, don't you think?

You probably want to tell me so, but don't quite dare. And I should play up to my part, shouldn't I? But I cannot—not satisfactorily. I'm really a bit disgusted with myself for having taken as much interest in you as I have. I write books for a living. My name is John Aldous."

With a little cry of amazement, his companion stopped. Without knowing it, her hand had gripped his arm.

"You are John Aldous—who wrote 'Fair Play,' and 'Women!'" she gasped.

"Yes," he said, amusement in his face.

"I have read those books—and I have read your plays," she breathed, a mysterious tremble in her voice. "You despise women!"

"Devoutly."

She drew a deep breath. Her hand dropped from his arm.

"This is very, very funny," she mused, gazing off to the sun-capped peaks of the mountains. "You have flayed women alive. You have made them want to mob you. And yet——"

"Millions of them read my books," he chuckled.

"Yes—all of them read your books," she replied, looking straight into his face. "And I guess—in many ways—you have pointed out things that are true."

It was his turn to show surprise.

"You believe that?"

"I do. More than that—I have always thought that I knew your secret—the big, hidden thing under your work, the thing which you do not reveal because you know the world would laugh at you. And so—*you despise me!*"

"Not you."

"I am a woman."

He laughed. The tan in his cheeks burned a deeper red.

"We are wasting time," he warned her. "In Bill's place I heard you say you were going to leave on the Tête Jaune train. I am going to take you to a real dinner. And now—I should let those good people know your name."

A moment—unflinching and steady—she looked into his face.

"It is Joanne, the name you have made famous as the dreadfulest woman in fiction. Joanne Gray."

"I am sorry," he said, and bowed low. "Come. If I am not mistaken I smell new-baked bread."

As they moved on he suddenly touched her arm. She felt for a moment the firm clasp of his fingers. There was a new light in his eyes, a glow of enthusiasm.

"I have it!" he cried. "You have brought it to me—the idea. I have been wanting a name for *her*—the woman in my new book. She is to be a tremendous surprise. I haven't found a name, until now—one that fits. I shall call her Ladygray!"

He felt the girl flinch. He was surprised at the sudden startled look that shot into her eyes, the swift ebbing of the colour from her cheeks. He drew away his hand at the strange change in her. He noticed how quickly she was breathing—that the fingers of her white hands were clasped tensely.

"You object," he said.

"Not enough to keep you from using it," she replied

in a low voice. "I owe you a great deal." He noted, too, how quickly she had recovered herself. Her head was a little higher. She looked toward the tents. "You were not mistaken," she added. "I smell new-made bread!"

"And I shall emphasize the first half of it—*Lady*gray," said John Aldous, as if speaking to himself. "That diminutizes it, you might say—gives it the touch of sentiment I want. You can imagine a lover saying 'Dear little *Lady*gray, are you warm and comfy? He wouldn't say Ladygray as if she wore a coronet, would he?"

"Smell-o'-bread—fresh bread!" sniffed Joanne Gray, as if she had not heard him. "It's making me hungry. Will you please hurry me to it, John Aldous?"

They were approaching the first of the three tent-houses, over which was a crudely painted sign which read "Otto Brothers, Guides and Outfitters." It was a large, square tent, with weather-faded red and blue stripes, and from it came the cheerful sound of a woman's laughter. Half a dozen trampish-looking Airedale terriers roused themselves languidly as they drew nearer. One of them stood up and snarled.

"They won't hurt you," assured Aldous. "They belong to Jack Bruce and Clossen Otto—the finest bunch of grizzly dogs in the Rockies." Another moment, and a woman had appeared in the door. "And that is Mrs. Jack Otto," he added under his breath. "If all women were like her I wouldn't have written the things you have read!"

He might have added that she was Scotch. But this was not necessary. The laughter was still in her good-humoured face. Aldous looked at his companion, and he

found her smiling back. The eyes of the two women had already met.

Briefly Aldous explained what had happend at Quade's, and that the young woman was leaving on the Tête Jaune train. The good-humoured smile left Mrs Otto's face when he mentioned Quade.

"I've told Jack I'd like to poison that man some day," she cried. "You poor dear, come in, I'll get you a cup of tea."

"Which always means dinner in the Otto camp," added Aldous.

"I'm not so hungry, but I'm tired—so tired," he heard the girl say as she went in with Mrs. Otto, and there was a new and strangely pathetic note in her voice. "I want to rest—until the train goes."

He followed them in, and stood for a moment near the door.

"There's a room in there, my dear," said the woman, drawing back a curtain. "Make yourself at home, and lie down on the bed until I have the tea ready."

When the curtain had closed behind her, John Aldous spoke in a low voice to the woman.

"Will you see her safely to the train, Mrs. Otto?" he asked. "It leaves at a quarter after two. I must be going."

He felt that he had sufficiently performed his duty. He left the tent, and paused for a moment outside to touzle affectionately the trampish heads of the bear dogs. Then he turned away, whistling. He had gone a dozen steps when a low voice stopped him. He turned. Joanne had come from the door.

For one moment he stared as if something more wonderful than anything he had ever seen had risen before him. The girl was bareheaded, and she stood in a sun mellowed by a film of cloud. Her head was piled with lustrous coils of gold-brown hair that her hat and veil had hidden. Never had he looked upon such wonderful hair, crushed and crumpled back from her smooth forehead; nor such marvellous whiteness of skin and pure blue depths of eyes! In her he saw now everything that was strong and splendid in woman. She was not girlishly sweet. She was not a girl. She was a woman—glorious to look at, a soul glowing out of her eyes, a strength that thrilled him in the quiet and beautiful mystery of her face.

"You were going without saying good-bye," she said. "Won't you let me thank you—a last time?"

Her voice brought him to himself again. A moment he bent over her hand. A moment he felt its warm, firm pressure in his own. The smile that flashed to his lips was hidden from her as he bowed his blond-gray head.

"Pardon me for the omission," he apologized. "Good-bye—and may good luck go with you!"

Their eyes met once more. With another bow he had turned, and was continuing his way. At the door Joanne Gray looked back. He was whistling again. His careless, easy stride was filled with a freedom that seemed to come to her in the breath of the mountains. And then she, too, smiled strangely as she reëntered the tent.

CHAPTER III

IF JOHN ALDOUS had betrayed no visible sign of inward vanquishment he at least was feeling its effect. For years his writings had made him the target for a world of women, and many men. The men he had regarded with indifferent toleration. The women were his life—the "frail and ineffective creatures" who gave spice to his great adventure, and made his days anything but monotonous. He was not unchivalrous. Deep down in his heart—and this was his own secret—he did not even despise women. But he had seen their weaknesses and their frailties as perhaps no other man had ever seen them, and he had written of them as no other man had ever written. This had brought him the condemnation of the host, the admiration of the few. His own personal veneer of antagonism against woman was purely artificial, and yet only a few had guessed it. He had built it up about him as a sort of protection. He called himself "an adventurer in the mysteries of feminism," and to be this successfully he had argued that he must destroy in himself the usual heart-emotions of the sex-man and the animal.

How far he had succeeded in this he himself did not know—until these last moments when he had bid good-bye to Joanne Gray. He confessed that she had found a cleft in his armour, and there was an uneasy thrill in his blood. It was not her beauty alone that had affected him. He

had trained himself to look at a beautiful woman as he might have looked at a beautiful flower, confident that if he went beyond the mere admiration of it he would find only burned-out ashes. But in her he had seen something that was more than beauty, something that for a flashing moment had set stirring every molecule in his being. He had felt the desire to rest his hand upon her shining hair!

He turned off into a winding path that led into the thick poplars, restraining an inclination to look back in the direction of the Otto camp. He pulled out the pipe he had dropped into his shirt pocket, filled it with fresh tobacco, and began smoking. As he smoked, his lips wore a quizzical smile, for he was honest enough to give Joanne Gray credit for her triumph. She had awakened a new kind of interest in him—only a passing interest, to be sure—but a *new* kind for all that. The fact amused him. In a large way he was a humourist—few guessing it, and he fully appreciated the humour of the present situation—that he, John Aldous, touted the world over as a woman-hater, wanted to peer out through the poplar foliage and see that wonderful gold-brown head shining in the sun once more!

He wandered more slowly on his way, wondering with fresh interest what his friends, the women, would say when they read his new book. His title for it was "Mothers." It was to be a tremendous surprise.

Suddenly his face became serious. He faced the sound of a distant phonograph. It was not the phonograph in Quade's place, but that of a rival dealer in soft drinks at the end of the "street." For a moment Aldous hesitated. Then he turned in the direction of the camp.

Quade was bolstered up on a stool, his back against the thin partition, when John Aldous sauntered in. There was still a groggy look in his mottled face. His thick bulk hung a bit limply. In his heavy-lidded eyes, underhung by watery pouches of sin and dissipation, there was a vengeful and beastlike glare. He was surrounded by his friends. One of them was taking a wet cloth from his head. There were a dozen in the canvas-walled room, all with their backs to the door, their eyes upon their fallen and dishonoured chief. For a moment John Aldous paused in the door. The cool and insolent smile hovered about his lips again, and little crinkles had gathered at the corners of his eyes.

"Did I hit you pretty hard, Bill?" he asked.

Every head was turned toward him. Bill Quade stared, his mouth open. He staggered to his feet, and stood dizzily.

"You—damn you!" he cried huskily.

Three or four of the men had already begun to move toward the stranger. Their hands were knotted, their faces murderously dark.

"Wait a minute, boys," warned Aldous coolly. "I've got something to say to you—and Bill. Then eat me alive if you want to. Do you want to be square enough to give me a word?"

Quade had settled back sickly on his stool. The others had stopped, waiting. The quiet and insolently confident smile had not left Aldous' lips.

"You'll feel better in a few minutes, Bill," he consoled. "A hard blow on the jaw always makes you sick at the pit of the stomach. That dizziness will pass away shortly.

Meanwhile, I'm going to give you and your pals a little verbal and visual demonstration of what you're up against, and warn you to bait no traps for a certain young woman whom you've lately seen. She's going on to Tête Jaune. And I know how your partner plays his game up there. I'm not particularly anxious to butt into your affairs and the business of this pretty bunch that's gathered about you, but I've come to give you a friendly warning for all that. If this young woman is embarrassed up at Tête Jaune you're going to settle with me."

Aldous had spoken without a tremor of excitement in his voice. Not one of the men noticed his speaking lips, his slim hands, or his careless posture as he leaned in the door. They were looking straight into his eyes, strangely scintillating and deadly earnest. In such a man mere bulk did not count.

"That much—for words," he went on. "Now I'm going to give you the visual demonstration. I know your game, Bill. You're already planning what you're going to do. You won't fight fair—because you never have. You've already decided that some morning I'll turn up missing, or be dug out from under a fall of rock, or go peacefully floating down the Athabasca. See! There's nothing in that hand, is there?"

He stretched out an empty hand toward them, palm up.

"And now!"

A twist of the wrist so swift their eyes could not follow, a metallic click, and the startled group were staring into the black muzzle of a menacing little automatic.

"That's known as the sleeve trick, boys," explained Aldous with his imperturbable smile. "It's a relic of the

old gun-fighting days when the best man was quickest. From now on, especially at night, I shall carry this little friend of mine just inside my wristband. There are eleven shots in it, and I shoot fairly straight. Good-day!"

Before they had recovered from their astonishment he was gone.

He did not follow the road along which Joanne had come a short time before, but turned again into the winding trail that led riverward through the poplars. Where before he had been a little amused at himself, he was now more seriously disgusted. He was not afraid of Quade, who was perhaps the most dangerous man along the line of rail. Neither was he afraid of the lawless men who worked his ends. But he knew that he had made powerful enemies, and all because of an unknown woman whom he had never seen until half an hour before. It was this that disturbed his equanimity—the *woman* of it, and the knowledge that his interference had been unsolicited and probably unnecessary. And now that he had gone this far he found it not easy to recover his balance. Who was this Joanne Gray? he asked himself. She was not ordinary—like the hundred other women who had gone on ahead of her to Tête Jaune Cache. If she had been that, he would soon have been in his little shack on the shore of the river, hard at work. He had planned work for himself that afternoon, and he was nettled to discover that his enthusiasm for the grand finale of a certain situation in his novel was gone. Yet for this he did not blame her. He was the fool. Quade and his friends would make him feel that sooner or later.

His trail led him to a partly dry muskeg bottom.

Beyond this was a thicker growth of timber, mostly spruce and cedar, from behind which came the rushing sound of water. A few moments more and he stood with the wide tumult of the Athabasca at his feet. He had chosen this spot for his little cabin because the river ran wild here among the rocks, and because pack-outfits going into the southward mountains could not disturb him by fording at this point. Across the river rose the steep embankments that shut in Buffalo Prairie, and still beyond that the mountains, thick with timber rising billow on billow until trees looked like twigs, with gray rock and glistening snow shouldering the clouds above the last purple line. The cabin in which he had lived and worked for many weeks faced the river and the distant Saw Tooth Range, and was partly hidden in a clump of jack-pines. He opened the door and entered. Through the window to the south and west he could see the white face of Mount Geikie, and forty miles away in that wilderness of peaks, the sombre frown of Hardesty; through it the sun came now, flooding his work as he had left it. The last page of manuscript on which he had been working was in his typewriter. He sat down to begin where he had left off in that pivotal situation in his masterpiece.

He read and re-read the last two or three pages of the manuscript, struggling to pick up the threads where he had dropped them. With each reading he became more convinced that his work for that afternoon was spoiled. And by whom? By *what?* A little fiercely he packed his pipe with fresh tobacco. Then he leaned back, lighted it, and laughed. More and more as the minutes passed he permitted himself to think of the strange young woman

whose beauty and personality had literally projected themselves into his workshop. He marvelled at the crudity of the questions which he asked himself, and yet he persisted in asking them. Who was she? What could be her mission at Tête Jaune Cache? She had repeated to him what she had said to the girl in the coach—that at Tête Jaune she had no friends. Beyond that, and her name, she had offered no enlightenment.

In the brief space that he had been with her he had mentally tabulated her age as twenty-eight—no older. Her beauty alone, the purity of her eyes, the freshness of her lips, and the slender girlishness of her figure, might have made him say twenty, but with those things he had found the maturer poise of the woman. It had been a flashlight picture, but one that he was sure of.

Several times during the next hour he turned to his work, and at last gave up his efforts entirely. From a peg in the wall he took down a little rifle. He had found it convenient to do much of his own cooking, and he had broken a few laws. The partridges were out of season, but temptingly fat and tender. With a brace of young broilers in mind for supper, he left the cabin and followed the narrow foot-trail up the river. He hunted for half an hour before he stirred a covey of birds. Two of these he shot. Concealing his meat and his gun near the trail he continued toward the ford half a mile farther up, wondering if Stevens, who was due to cross that day, had got his outfit over. Not until then did he look at his watch. He was surprised to find that the Tête Jaune train had been gone three quarters of an hour. For some unaccountable reason he felt easier. He went on, whistling.

At the ford he found Stevens standing close to the river's edge, twisting one of his long red moustaches in doubt and vexation.

"Damn this river," he growled, as Aldous came up. "You never can tell what it's going to do overnight. Look there! Would you try to cross?"

"I wouldn't," replied Aldous. "It's a foot higher than yesterday. I wouldn't take the chance."

"Not with two guides, a cook, and a horse-wrangler on your pay-roll—and a hospital bill as big as Geikie staring you in the face?" argued Stevens, who had been sick for three months. "I guess you'd pretty near take a chance. I've a notion to."

"I wouldn't," repeated Aldous.

"But I've lost two days already, and I'm taking that bunch of sightseers out for a lump sum, guaranteeing 'em so many days on the trail. This ain't what you might call *on the trail.* They don't expect to pay for this delay, and that outfit back in the bush is costing me thirty dollars a day. We can get the dunnage and ourselves over in the flat-boat. It'll make our arms crack—but we can do it. I've got twenty-seven horses. I've a notion to chase 'em in. The river won't be any lower to-morrow."

"But you may be a few horses ahead."

Stevens bit off a chunk of tobacco and sat down. For a few moments he looked at the muddy flood with an ugly eye. Then he chuckled, and grinned.

"Came through the camp half an hour ago," he said. "Hear you cleaned up on Bill Quade."

"A bit," said Aldous.

Stevens rolled his quid and spat into the water slushing at his feet.

"Guess I saw the woman when she got off the train," he went on. "She dropped something. I picked it up, but she was so darned pretty as she stood there looking about I didn't dare go up an' give it to her. If it had been worth anything I'd screwed up my courage. But it wasn't—so I just gawped like the others. It was a piece of paper. Mebby you'd like it as a souvenir, seein' as you laid out Quade for her."

As he spoke, Stevens fished a crumpled bit of paper from his pocket and gave it to his companion. Aldous had sat down beside him. He smoothed the page out on his knee. There was no writing on it, but it was crowded thick with figures, as if the maker of the numerals had been doing some problem in mathematics. The chief thing that interested him was that wherever monetary symbols were used it was the "pound" and not the "dollar" sign. The totals of certain columns were rather startling.

"Guess she's a millionaire if that's her own money she's been figgering," said Stevens. "Notice that figger there!" He pointed with a stubby forefinger. "Pretty near a billion, ain't it?"

"Seven hundred and fifty thousand," said Aldous.

He was thinking of the "pound" sign. She had not looked like the Englishwomen he had met. He folded the slip of paper and put it in his pocket.

Stevens eyed him seriously.

"I was coming over to give you a bit of advice before I left for the Maligne Lake country," he said. "You'd

better move. Quade won't want you around after this Besides——"

"What?"

"My kid heard something," continued the packer, edging nearer. "You was mighty good to the kid when I was down an' out, Aldous. I ought to tell you. It wasn't an hour ago the kid was behind the tent an' he heard Quade and Slim Barker talking. So far as I can find from the kid, Quade has gone nutty over her. He's ravin'. He told Slim that he'd give ten thousand dollars to get her in his hands. What sent the boy down to me was Quade tellin' Slim that he'd get *you* first. He told Slim to go on to Tête Jaune—follow the girl!"

"The deuce you say!" cried Aldous, clutching the other's arm suddenly. "He's done that?"

"That's what the kid says."

Aldous rose to his feet slowly. The careless smile was playing about his mouth again. A few men had learned that in those moments John Aldous was dangerous.

"The kid is undoubtedly right," he said, looking down at Stevens. "But I am quite sure the young woman is capable of taking care of herself. Quade has a tremendous amount of nerve, setting Slim to follow her, hasn't he? Slim may run up against a husband or a brother."

Stevens haunched his shoulders.

"It's not the woman I'm thinking about. It's you. I'd sure change my location."

"Why wouldn't it be just as well if I told the police of his threat?" asked Aldous, looking across the river with a glimmer of humour in his eyes.

"Oh, hell!" was the packer's rejoinder.

Slowly he unwound his long legs and rose to his feet.

"Take my advice—move!" he said. "As for me, I'm going to cross that cussed river this afternoon or know the reason why."

He stalked away in the direction of his outfit, chewing viciously at his quid. For a few moments Aldous stood undecided. He would liked to have joined the half-dozen men he saw lounging restfully a distance beyond the grazing ponies. But Stevens had made him acutely aware of a new danger. He was thinking of his cabin—and the priceless achievement of his last months of work, his manuscript. If Quade should destroy that——

He clenched his hands and walked swiftly toward his camp. To "burn out" an enemy was one of Quade's favourite methods of retaliation. He had heard this. He also knew that Quade's work was done so cleverly that the police had been unable to call him to account.

Quade's status had interested Aldous from the beginning. He had discovered that Quade and Culver Rann, his partner at Tête Jaune, were forces to be reckoned with even by the "powers" along the line of rail. They were the two chiefs of the "underground," the men who controlled the most dangerous element from Miette to Fort George. He had once seen Culver Rann, a quiet, keen-eyed, immaculately groomed man of forty—the cleverest scoundrel that had ever drifted into the Canadian west. He had been told that Rann was really the brain of the combination, and that the two had picked up a quarter of a million in various ways. But it was Quade with whom he had to deal now, and he began to thank Stevens for his warning. He was filled with a sense of relief when he

reached his cabin and found it as he had left it. He always made a carbon copy of his work. This copy he now put into a waterproof tin box, and the box he concealed under a log a short distance back in the bush.

"Now go ahead, Quade," he laughed to himself, a curious, almost exultant ring in his voice. "I haven't had any real excitement for so long I can't remember, and if you start the fun there's going to *be* fun!"

He returned to his birds, perched himself behind a bush at the river's edge, and began skinning them. He had almost finished when he heard hoarse shouts from up the river. From his position he could see the stream a hundred yards below the ford. Stevens had driven in his horses. He could see them breasting the first sweep of the current, their heads held high, struggling for the opposite shore. He rose, dropped his birds, and stared.

"Good God, what a fool!" he gasped.

He saw the tragedy almost before it had begun. Still three hundred yards below the swimming horses was the gravelly bar which they must reach on the opposite side. He noted the grayish strip of smooth water that marked the end of the dead-line. Three or four of the stronger animals were forging steadily toward this. The others grouped close together, almost motionless in their last tremendous fight, were left farther and farther behind. Then came the break. A mare and her yearling colt had gone in with the bunch. Aldous saw the colt, with its small head and shoulders high out of the water, sweep down like a chip with the current. A cold chill ran through him as he heard the whinneying scream of the mother—a warning cry that held for him the pathos and

the despair of a creature that was human. He knew what it meant. "Wait—I'm coming—I'm coming!" was in that cry. He saw the mare give up and follow resistlessly with the deadly current, her eyes upon her colt. The heads behind her wavered, then turned, and in another moment the herd was sweeping down to its destruction.

Aldous felt like turning his head. But the spectacle fascinated him, and he looked. He did not think of Stevens and his loss as the first of the herd plunged in among the rocks. He stood with white face and clenched hands, leaning over the water boiling at his feet, cursing softly in his helplessness. To him came the last terrible cries of the perishing animals. He saw head after head go under. Out of the white spume of a great rock against which the flood split itself with the force of an avalanche he saw one horse pitched bodily, as if thrown from a huge catapault. The last animal had disappeared when chance turned his eyes upstream and close in to shore. Here flowed a steady current free of rock, and down this—head and shoulders still high out of the water—came the colt! What miracle had saved the little fellow thus far Aldous did not stop to ask. Fifty yards below it would meet the fate of the others. Half that distance in the direction of the maelstrom below was the dead trunk of a fallen spruce overhanging the water for fifteen or twenty feet. In a flash Aldous was racing toward it. He climbed out on it, leaned far over, and reached down. His hand touched the water. In the grim excitement of rescue he forgot his own peril. There was one chance in twenty that the colt would come within his reach, and it did. He made a single lunge and caught it by the ear. For a moment

after that his heart turned sick. Under the added strain the dead spruce sagged down with a warning crack. But it held, and Aldous hung to his grip on the ear. Foot by foot he wormed his way back, until at last he had dragged the little animal ashore.

And then a voice spoke behind him, a voice that he would have recognized among ten thousand, low, sweet, thrilling.

"That was splendid, John Aldous!" it said. "If I were a man I would want to be a man like you!"

He turned. A few steps from him stood Joanne Gray. Her face was as white as the bit of lace at her throat. Her lips were colourless, and her bosom rose and fell swiftly. He knew that she, too, had witnessed the tragedy. And the eyes that looked at him were glorious.

CHAPTER IV

TO JOHN ALDOUS Joanne's appearance at this moment was like an anti-climax. It plunged him headlong for a single moment into what he believed to be the absurdity of a situation. He had a quick mental picture of himself out on the dead spruce, performing a bit of mock-heroism by dragging in a half-drowned colt by one ear. In another instant this had passed, and he was wondering why Joanne Gray was not on her way to Tête Jaune.

"It was splendid!" she was saying again, her eyes glowing at him. "I know men who would not have risked that for a human!"

"Perhaps they would have been showing good judgment," replied Aldous.

He noticed now that she was holding with one hand the end of a long slender sapling which a week or two before he had cut and trimmed for a fish-pole. He nodded toward it, a half-cynical smile on his lips.

"Were you going to fish me out—or the colt?" he asked.

"You," she replied. "I thought you were in danger." And then she added, "I suppose you are deeply grateful that fate did not compel you to be saved by a woman."

"Not at all. If the spruce had snapped, I would have caught at the end of your sapling like any drowning rat—or man. Allow me to thank you."

She had stepped down to the level strip of sand on which the colt was weakly struggling to rise to its feet. She was breathing quickly. Her face was still pale. She was without a hat, and as she bent for a moment over the colt Aldous felt his eyes drawn irresistibly to the soft thick coils of her hair, a glory of colour that made him think of the lustrous brown of a ripe wintelberry. She looked up suddenly and caught his eyes upon her.

"I came quite by accident," she explained quickly. "I wanted to be alone, and Mrs. Otto said this path would lead to the river. When I saw you I was about to turn back. And then I saw the other—the horses coming down the stream. It was terrible. Are they all drowned?"

"All that you saw. It wasn't a pretty sight, was it?" There was a suggestive inquiry in his voice as he added, "If you had gone to Tête Jaune you would have missed the unpleasantness of the spectacle."

"I would have gone, but something happened. They say it was a cave-in, a slide—something like that. The train cannot go on until to-morrow."

"And you are to stay with the Ottos?'

She nodded.

Quick as a flash she had seemed to read his thoughts.

"I am sorry," she added, before he could speak. "I can see that I have annoyed you. I have literally projected myself into your work, and I am afraid that I have caused you trouble. Mrs. Otto has told me of this man they call Quade. She says he is dangerous. And I have made him your enemy."

"I am not afraid of Quade. The incident was nothing more than an agreeable interruption to what was becoming

a rather monotonous existence up here. I have always believed, you know, that a certain amount of physical excitement is good oil for our mental machinery. That, perhaps, was why you caught me hauling at His Coltship's ear."

He had spoken stiffly. There was a hard note in his voice, a suggestion of something that was displeasing in his forced laugh. He knew that in these moments he was fighting against his inner self—against his desire to tell her how glad he was that something had held back the Tête Jaune train, and how wonderful her hair looked in the afternoon sun. He was struggling to keep himself behind the barriers he had built up and so long maintained in his writings. And yet, as he looked, he felt something crumbling into ruins. He knew that he had hurt her. The hardness of his words, the coldness of his smile, his apparently utter indifference to her had sent something that was almost like a quick, physical pain into her eyes. He drew a step nearer, so that he caught the soft contour of her cheek. Joanne Gray heard him, and lowered her head slightly, so that he could not see. She was a moment too late. On her cheek Aldous saw a single creeping drop—a tear.

In an instant he was at her side. With a quick movement she brushed the tear away before she faced him.

"I've hurt you," he said, looking her straight in the eyes. "I've hurt you, and God knows I'm a brute for doing it. I've treated you as badly as Quade—only in a different way. I know how I've made you feel—that you've been a nuisance, and have got me into trouble,

and that I don't want to have anything more to do with you. Have I made you feel that?"

"I am afraid—you have."

He reached out a hand, and almost involuntarily her own came to it. She saw the change in his face, regret, pain, and then that slow-coming, wonderful laughter in his eyes.

"That's just how I set out to make you feel," he confessed, the warmth of her hand sending a thrill through him. "I might as well be frank, don't you think? Until you came I had but one desire, and that was to finish my book. I had planned great work for to-day. And you spoiled it. I couldn't get you out of my mind. And it made me—ugly."

"And that was—all?" she whispered, a tense waiting in her eyes. "You didn't think——"

"What Quade thought," he bit in sharply. The grip of his fingers hurt her hand. "No, not that. My God, I didn't make you think *that?*"

"I'm a stranger—and they say women don't go to Tête Jaune alone," she answered doubtfully.

"That's true, they don't—not as a general rule. Especially women like you. You're alone, a stranger, and too beautiful. I don't say that to flatter you. You are beautiful, and you undoubtedly know it. To let you go on alone and unprotected among three or four thousand men like most of those up there would be a crime. And the women, too—the Little Sisters. They'd blast you. If you had a husband, a brother or a father waiting for you it would be different. But you've told me you haven't. You have made me change my mind about my

book. You are of more interest to me just now than that. Will you believe me? Will you let me be a friend, if you need a friend?"

To Aldous it seemed that she drew herself up a little proudly. For a moment she seemed taller. A rose-flush of colour spread over her cheeks. She drew her hand from him. And yet, as she looked at him, he could see that she was glad.

"Yes, I believe you," she said. "But I must not accept your offer of friendship. You have done more for me now than I can ever repay. Friendship means service, and to serve me would spoil your plans, for you are in great haste to complete your book."

"If you mean that you need my assistance, the book can wait."

"I shouldn't have said that," she cut in quickly, her lips tightening slightly. "It was utterly absurd of me to hint that I might require assistance—that I cannot take care of myself. But I shall be proud of the friendship of John Aldous."

"Yes, you can take care of yourself, Ladygray," said Aldous softly, looking into her eyes and yet speaking as if to himself. "That is why you have broken so curiously into my life. It's *that*—and not your beauty. I have known beautiful women before. But they were—just women, frail things that might snap under stress. I have always thought there is only one woman in ten thousand who would not do that—under certain conditions. I believe you are that one in ten thousand. You can go on to Tête Jaune alone. You can go anywhere alone—and care for yourself."

He was looking at her so strangely that she held her breath, her lips parted, the flush in her cheeks deepening.

"And the strangest part of it all is that I have always known you away back in my imagination," he went on. "You have lived there, and have troubled me. I could not construct you perfectly. It is almost inconceivable that you should have borne the same name—Joanne. Joanne, of 'Fair Play.'"

She gave a little gasp.

"Joanne was—terrible," she cried. "She was bad—bad to the heart and soul of her!"

"She was splendid," replied Aldous, without a change in his quiet voice. "She was splendid—but bad. I racked myself to find a soul for her, and I failed. And yet she was splendid. It was my crime—not hers—that she lacked a soul. She would have been my ideal, but I spoiled her. And by spoiling her I sold half a million copies of the book. I did not do it purposely. I would have given her a soul if I could have found one. She went her way."

"And you compare me to—*her?*"

"Yes," said Aldous deliberately. "You are that Joanne. But you possess what I could not give to her. Joanne of 'Fair Play' was splendid without a soul. You have what she lacked. You may not understand, but you have come to perfect what I only partly created."

The colour had slowly ebbed from Joanne's face. There was a mysterious darkness in her eyes.

"If you were not John Aldous I would—strike you," she said. "As it is—yes—I want you as a friend."

She held out her hand. For a moment he felt its

warmth again in his own. He bowed over it. Her eyes rested steadily on his blond head, and again she noted the sprinkle of premature gray in his hair. For a second time she felt almost overwhelmingly the mysterious strength of this man. Perhaps each took three breaths before John Aldous raised his head. In that time something wonderful and complete passed between them. Neither could have told the other what it was. When their eyes met again, it was in their faces.

"I have planned to have supper in my cabin to-night," said Aldous, breaking the tension of that first moment. "Won't you be my guest, Ladygray?"

"Mrs. Otto——" she began.

"I will go to her at once and explain that you are going to eat partridges with me," he interrupted. "Come—let me show you into my workshop and home."

He led her to the cabin and into its one big room.

"You will make yourself at home while I am gone, won't you?" he invited. "If it will give you any pleasure you may peel a few potatoes. I won't be gone ten minutes."

Not waiting for any protest she might have, Aldous slipped back through the door and took the path up to the Ottos'.

CHAPTER V

AS SOON as he had passed from the view of the cabin door Aldous shortened his pace. He knew that never in his life had he needed to readjust himself more than at the present moment. A quarter of an hour had seen a complete and miraculous revolution within him. It was a change so unusual and apparently so impossible that he could not grasp the situation and the fact all at once. But the truth of it swept over him more and more swiftly as he made his way along the dark, narrow trail that led up to the Miette Plain. It was something that not only amazed and thrilled him. First—as in all things—he saw the humour of it. He, John Aldous of all men, had utterly obliterated himself, and for a *woman*. He had even gone so far as to offer the sacrifice of his most important work. Frankly he had told Joanne that she interested him more just now than his book. Again he repeated to himself that it had not been a surrender—but an obliteration. With a pair of lovely eyes looking quietly into him, he had wiped the slate clean of the things he had preached for ten years and the laws he had made for himself. And as he came in sight of the big Otto tent, he found himself smiling, his breath coming quickly, strange voices singing within him.

He stopped to load and light his pipe before he faced Mrs. Otto, and he clouded himself in as much smoke as

possible while he explained to her that he had almost forced Joanne to stop at his cabin and eat partridges with him. He learned that the Tête Jaune train could not go on until the next day, and after Mrs. Otto had made him take a loaf of fresh bread and a can of home-made marmalade as a contribution to their feast, he turned back toward the cabin, trying to whistle in his old careless way.

The questions he had first asked himself about Joanne forced themselves back upon him now with deeper import. Almost unconsciously he had revealed himself to her. He had spread open for her eyes and understanding the page which he had so long hidden. He had as much as confessed to her that she had come to change him—to complete what he had only half created. It had been an almost inconceivable and daring confession, and he believed that she understood him. More than that, she had read about him. She had read his books. She knew John Aldous—the man.

But what did he know about her beyond the fact that her name was Joanne Gray, and that the on-sweeping Horde had brought her into his life as mysteriously as a storm might have flung him a bit of down from a swan's breast? Where had she come from? And why was she going to Tête Jaune? It must be some important motive was taking her to a place like Tête Jaune, the rail-end, a place of several thousand men, with its crude muscle and brawn and the seven passions of man. It was an impossible place for a young and beautiful woman unprotected. If Joanne had known any one among the engineers or contractors, or had she possessed a letter of introduction to them, the tense lines would not have gathered so deeply

about the corners of Aldous' mouth. But these men whose brains were behind the Horde—the engineers and the contractors—knew what women alone and unprotected meant at Tête Jaune. Such women floated in with the Horde. And Joanne was going in with the Horde. There lay the peril—and the mystery of it.

So engrossed was Aldous in his thoughts that he had come very quietly to the cabin door. It was Joanne's voice that roused him. Sweet and low she was singing a few lines from a song which he had never heard.

She stopped when Aldous appeared at the door. It seemed to him that her eyes were a deeper, more wonderful blue as she looked up at him, and smiled. She had found a towel for an apron, and was peeling potatoes.

"You will have some unusual excuses to make very soon," she greeted him. "We had a visitor while you were gone. I was washing the potatoes when I looked up to find a pair of the fiercest, reddest moustaches I have ever seen, ornamenting the doorway. The man had two eyes that seemed about to fall out when he saw me. He popped away like a rabbit—and—and—there's something he left behind in his haste!"

Joanne's eyes were flooded with laughter as she nodded at the door. On the sill was a huge quid of tobacco.

"Stevens!" Aldous chuckled. "God bless my soul, if you frightened him into giving up a quid of tobacco like that you sure *did* startle him some!" He kicked Stevens' lost property out with the toe of his boot and turned to Joanne, showing her the fresh bread and marmalade. "Mrs. Otto sent these to you," he said. "And the train won't leave until to-morrow."

In her silence he pulled a chair in front of her, sat down close, and thrust the point of his hunting knife into one of the two remaining potatoes.

"And when it does go I'm going with you," he added.

He expected this announcement would have some effect on her. As she jumped up with the pan of potatoes, leaving the one still speared on the end of his knife, he caught only the corner of a bewitching smile.

"You still believe that I will be unable to take care of myself up at this terrible Tête Jaune?" she asked, bending for a moment over the table. "Do you?"

"No. You can care for yourself anywhere, Ladygray," he repeated. "But I am quite sure that it will be less troublesome for me to see that no insults are offered you than for you to resent those insults when they come. Tête Jaune is full of Quades," he added.

The smile was gone from her face when she turned to him. Her blue eyes were filled with a tense anxiety.

"I had almost forgotten that man," she whispered. "And you mean that you would fight for me—again?"

"A thousand times."

The colour grew deeper in her cheeks. "I read something about you once that I have never forgotten, John Aldous," she said. "It was after you returned from Thibet. It said that you were largely made up of two emotions—your contempt for woman and your love of adventure; that it would be impossible for you not to see a flaw in one, and that for the other—physical excitement—you would go to the ends of the earth. Perhaps it is this—your desire for adventure—that makes you want to go with me to Tête Jaune?"

"I am beginning to believe that it will be the greatest adventure of my life," he replied, and something in his quiet voice held her silent. He rose to his feet, and stood before her. "It is already the Great Adventure," he went on. "I feel it. And I am the one to judge. Until to-day I would have staked my life that no power could have wrung from me the confession I am going to make to you voluntarily. I have laughed at the opinion the world has held of me. To me it has all been a colossal joke. I have enjoyed the hundreds of columns aimed at me by excited women through the press. They have all asked the same question: Why do you not write of the good things in women instead of always the bad? I have never given them an answer. But I answer you now—here. I have not picked upon the weaknesses of women because I despise them. Those weaknesses—the destroying frailties of womankind—I have driven over roughshod through the pages of my books because I have always believed that Woman was the one thing which God came nearest to creating *perfect*. I believe they should be perfect. And because they have not quite that perfection which should be theirs I have driven the cold facts home as hard as I could. I have been a fool and an iconoclast instead of a builder. This confession to you is proof that you have brought me face to face with the greatest adventure of all."

The colour in her cheeks had centred in two bright spots. Her lips formed words which came slowly, strangely.

"I guess—I understand," she said. "Perhaps I, too, would have been that kind of an iconoclast—if I could have put the things I have thought into written words."

She drew a deep breath, and went on, her eyes full upon him, speaking as if out of a dream. "The Great Adventure—for you. Yes; and perhaps for both."

Her hands were drawn tightly to her breast. Something about her as she stood there, her back to the table, drew John Aldous to her side, forced the question from his lips: "Tell me, Ladygray—why are you going to Tête Jaune?"

In that same strange way, as if her lips were framing words beyond their power to control, she answered:

"I am going—to find—my husband."

CHAPTER VI

SILENT, his head bowed a little, John Aldous stood before her after those last words. A slight noise outside gave him the pretext to turn to the door. She was going to Tête Jaune—to find her husband! He had not expected that. For a breath, as he looked out toward the bush, his mind was in a strange daze. A dozen times she had given him to understand there was no husband, father, or brother waiting for her at the rail-end. She had told him that she was alone—without friends. And now, like a confession, those words had come strangely from her lips.

What he had heard was one of Otto's pack-horses coming down to drink. He turned toward her again.

Joanne stood with her back still to the table. She had slipped a hand into the front of her dress and had drawn forth a long thick envelope. As she opened it, Aldous saw that it contained banknotes. From among these she picked out a bit of paper and offered it to him.

"That will explain—partly," she said.

It was a newspaper clipping, worn and faded, with a date two years old. It had apparently been cut from an English paper, and told briefly of the tragic death of Mortimer FitzHugh, son of a prominent Devonshire family, who had lost his life while on a hunting trip in the British Columbia Wilds.

"He was my husband," said Joanne, as Aldous finished. "Until six months ago I had no reason to believe that the statement in the paper was not true. Then—an acquaintance came out here hunting. He returned with a strange story. He declared that he had seen Mr. FitzHugh alive. Now you know why I am here. I had not meant to tell you. It places me in a light which I do not think that I can explain away—just now. I have come to prove or disprove his death. If he is alive——"

For the first time she betrayed the struggle she was making against some powerful emotion which she was fighting to repress. Her face had paled. She stopped herself with a quick breath, as if knowing that she had already gone too far.

"I guess I understand," said Aldous. "For some reason your anxiety is not that you will find him dead, Ladygray, but that you may find him alive."

"Yes—yes, that is it. But you must not urge me farther. It is a terrible thing to say. You will think I am not a woman, but a fiend. And I am your guest. You have invited me to supper. And—the potatoes are ready, and there is no fire!"

She had forced a smile back to her lips. John Aldous whirled toward the door.

"I will have the partridges in two seconds!" he cried. "I dropped them when the horses went through the rapids."

The oppressive and crushing effect of Joanne's first mention of a husband was gone. He made no effort to explain or analyze the two sudden changes that swept over him. He accepted them as facts, and that was all.

Where a few moments before there had been the leaden grip of something that seemed to be physically choking him, there was now again the strange buoyancy with which he had gone to the Otto tent. He began to whistle as he went to the river's edge. He was whistling when he returned, the two birds in his hand. Joanne was waiting for him in the door. Again her face was a faintly tinted vision of tranquil loveliness; her eyes were again like the wonderful blue pools over the sunlit mountains. She smiled as he came up. He was amazed—not that she had recovered so completely from the emotional excitement that had racked her, but because she betrayed in no way a sign of grief—of suspense or of anxiety. A few minutes ago he had heard her singing. He could almost believe that her lips might break into song again as she stood there.

From that moment until the sun sank behind the mountains and gray shadows began to creep in where the light had been, there was no other reference to the things that had happened or the things that had been said since Joanne's arrival. For the first time in years John Aldous completely forgot his work. He was lost in Joanne. With the tremendous reaction that was working out in him she became more and more wonderful to him with each breath that he drew. He made no effort to control the change that was sweeping through him. His one effort was to keep it from being too apparent to her.

The way in which Joanne had taken his invitation was as delightful as it was new to him. She had become both guest and hostess. With her lovely arms bared halfway to the shoulders she rolled out a batch of biscuits. "Hot

biscuits go so well with marmalade," she told him. He built a fire. Beyond that, and bringing in the water, she gave him to understand that his duties were at an end, and that he could smoke while she prepared the supper. With the beginning of dusk he closed the cabin door that he might have an excuse for lighting the big hanging lamp a little earlier. He had imagined how its warm glow would flood down upon the thick soft coils of her shining hair.

Every fibre in him throbbed with a keen and exquisite satisfaction as he sat down opposite her. During the meal he looked into the quiet, velvety blue of her eyes a hundred times. He found it a delightful sensation to talk to her and look into those eyes at the same time. He told her more about himself than he had ever told another soul. It was she who spoke first of the manuscript upon which he was working. He had spoken of certain adventures that had led up to the writing of one of his books.

"And this last book you are writing, which you call 'Mothers,'" she said. "Is it to be like 'Fair Play?'"

"It was to have been the last of the trilogy. But it won't be now, Ladygray. I've changed my mind."

"But it is so nearly finished, you say?"

"I would have completed it this week. I was rushing it to an end at fever heat when—you came."

He saw the troubled look in her eyes, and hastened to add:

"Let us not talk about that manuscript, Ladygray. Some day I will let you read it, and then you will understand why your coming has not hurt it. At first I was unreasonably disturbed because I thought that I must

finish it within a week from to-day. I start out on a new adventure then—a strange adventure, into the North."

"That means—the wild country?" she asked. "Up there in the North—there are no people?"

"An occasional Indian, perhaps a prospector now and then," he said. "Last year I travelled a hundred and twenty-seven days without seeing a human face except that of my Cree companion."

She had leaned a little over the table, and was looking at him intently, her eyes shining.

"That is why I have understood you, and read between the printed lines in your books," she said. "If I had been a man, I would have been a great deal like you. I love those things—loneliness, emptiness, the great spaces where you hear only the whisperings of the winds and the fall of no other feet but your own. Oh, I should have been a man! It was born in me. It was a part of me. And I loved it—loved it."

A poignant grief had shot into her eyes. Her voice broke almost in a sob. Amazed, he looked at her in silence across the table.

"You have lived that life, Ladygray?" he said after a moment. "You have seen it?"

"Yes," she nodded, clasping and unclasping her slim white hands. "For years and years, perhaps even more than you, John Aldous! I was born in it. And it was my life for a long time—until my father died." She paused, and he saw her struggling to subdue the quivering throb in her throat. "We were inseparable," she went on, her voice becoming suddenly strange and quiet. "He

was father, mother—everything to me. It was too wonderful. Together we hunted out the mysteries and the strange things in the out-of-the-way places of the earth. It was his passion. He had given birth to it in me. I was always with him, everywhere. And then he died, soon after his discovery of that wonderful buried city of Mindano, in the heart of Africa. Perhaps you have read——"

"Good God," breathed Aldous, so low that his voice did not rise above a whisper. "Joanne—Ladygray—you are not speaking of Daniel Gray—Sir Daniel Gray, the Egyptologist, the antiquarian who uncovered the secrets of an ancient and wonderful civilization in the heart of darkest Africa?"

"Yes."

"And you—are his daughter?"

She bowed her head.

Like one in a dream John Aldous rose from his chair and went to her. He seized her hands and drew her up so that they stood face to face. Again that strange and beautiful calmness filled her eyes.

"Our trails have strangely crossed, Lady Joanne," he said. "They have been crossing—for years. While Sir Daniel was at Murja, on the eve of his great discovery, I was at St. Louis on the Senegal coast. I slept in that little Cape Verde hotel, in the low whitewashed room overlooking the sea. The proprietor told me that Sir Daniel had occupied it before me, and I found a broken fountain pen in the drawer of that sickly black teakwood desk, with the carved serpent's head. And I was at Gampola at another time, headed for the interior of

Ceylon, when I learned that I was travelling again one of Sir Daniel's trails. And you were with him!"

"Always," said Joanne.

For a few tense moments they had looked steadily into each other's eyes. Swiftly, strangely, the world was bridging itself for them. Their minds swept back swiftly as the fire in a thunder-sky. They were no longer strangers. They were no longer friends of a day. The grip of Aldous' hands tightened. A hundred things sprang to his lips. Before he could speak, he saw a sudden, startled change leap into Joanne's face. She had turned her face a little, so that she was looking toward the window. A frightened cry broke from her lips. Aldous whirled about. There was nothing there. He looked at Joanne again. She was white and trembling. Her hands were clutched at her breast. Her eyes, big and dark and staring, were still fixed on the window.

"That man!" she panted. "His face was there—against the glass—like a devil's!"

"Quade?"

"Yes."

She caught at his arm as he sprang toward the door.

"Stop!" she cried. "You mustn't go out——"

For a moment he turned at the door. He was as she had seen him in Quade's place, terribly cool, a strange, quiet smile on his lips. His eyes were gray, smiling steel.

"Close the door after me and lock it until I return," he said. "You are the first woman guest I ever had, Lady-gray. I cannot allow you to be insulted!"

As he went out she saw him slip something from his pocket. She caught the glitter of it in the lamp-glow.

CHAPTER VII

IT WAS in the blood of John Aldous to kill Quade. He ran with the quickness of a hare around the end of the cabin, past the window, and then stopped to listen, his automatic in his hand, his eye piercing the gloom for some moving shadow. He had not counted on an instant's hesitation. He would shoot Quade, for he knew why the mottled beast had been at the window. Stevens' boy had been right. Quade was after Joanne. His ugly soul was disrupted with a desire to possess her, and Aldous knew that when roused by passion he was more like a devil-fish than a man—a creeping, slimy, night-seeking creature who had not only the power of the underworld back of him, but wealth as well. He did not think of him as a man as he stood listening, but as a beast. He was ready to shoot. But he saw nothing. He heard no sound that could have been made by a stumbling foot or a moving body. An hour later, the moon would have been up, but it was dark now except for the stars. He heard the hoot of an owl a hundred yards away. Out in the river something splashed. From the timber beyond Buffalo Prairie came the yapping bark of a coyote. For five minutes he stood as silent as one of the rocks behind him. He realized that to go on—to seek blindly for Quade in the darkness, would be folly. He went back, tapped at the door, and reëntered the cabin when Joanne threw back the lock.

She was still pale. Her eyes were bright.

"I was coming—in a moment," she said. "I was beginning to fear that——"

"—he had struck me down in the dark?" added Aldous, as she hesitated. "Well, he would like to do just that, Joanne." Unconsciously her name had slipped from him. It seemed the most natural thing in the world for him to call her Joanne now. "Is it necessary for me to tell you what this man Quade is—why he was looking through the window?"

She shuddered.

"No—no—I understand!"

"Only partly," continued Aldous, his face white and set. "It is necessary that you should know more than you have guessed, for your own protection. If you were like most other women I would not tell you the truth, but would try to shield you from it. As it is you should know. There is only one other man in the Rocky Mountains more dangerous than Bill Quade. He is Culver Rann, up at Tête Jaune. They are partners—partners in crime, in sin, in everything that is bad and that brings them gold. Their influence among the rougher elements along the line of rail is complete. They are so strongly entrenched that they have put contractors out of business because they would not submit to blackmail. The few harmless police we have following the steel have been unable to touch them. They have cleaned up hundreds of thousands, chiefly in three things—blackmail, whisky, and women. Quade is the viler of the two. He is like a horrible beast. Culver Rann makes me think of a sleek and shining serpent. But it is this man Quade——"

He found it almost impossible to go on with Joanne's blue eyes gazing so steadily into his.

"—whom we have made our enemy," she finished for him.

"Yes—and more than that," he said, partly turning his head away. "You cannot go on to Tête Jaune alone, Joanne. You must go nowhere alone. If you do——"

"What will happen?"

"I don't know. Perhaps nothing would happen. But you cannot go alone. I am going to take you back to Mrs. Otto now. And to-morrow I shall go on to Tête Jaune with you. It is fortunate that I have a place up there to which I can take you, and where you will be safe."

As they were preparing to go, Joanne glanced ruefully at the table.

"I am ashamed to leave the dishes in that mess," she said.

He laughed, and tucked her hand under his arm as they went through the door. When they had passed through the little clearing, and the darkness of the spruce and balsam walls shut them in, he took her hand.

"It is dark and you may stumble," he apologized. "This isn't much like the shell plaza in front of the Cape Verde, is it?"

"No. Did you pick up any of the little red bloodshells? I did, and they made me shiver. There were strange stories associated with them."

He knew that she was staring ahead into the blank wall of gloom as she spoke, and that it was not thought of the bloodshells, but of Quade, that made her fingers close

more tightly about his own. His right hand was gripping the butt of his automatic. Every nerve in him was on the alert, yet she could detect nothing of caution or preparedness in his careless voice.

"The bloodstones didn't trouble me," he answered. "I can't remember anything that upset me more than the snakes. I am a terrible coward when it comes to anything that crawls without feet. I will run from a snake no longer than your little finger—in fact, I'm just as scared of a little grass snake as I am of a python. It's the *thing*, and not its size, that horrifies me. Once I jumped out of a boat into ten feet of water because my companion caught an eel on his line, and persisted in the argument that it was a fish. Thank Heaven we don't have snakes up here. I've seen only three or four in all my experience in the Northland."

She laughed softly in spite of the uneasy thrill the night held for her.

"It is hard for me to imagine you being afraid," she said. "And yet if you were afraid I know it would be of just some little thing like that. My father was one of the bravest men in the world, and a hundred times I have seen him show horror at sight of a spider. If you were afraid of snakes, why did you go up the Gampola, in Ceylon?"

"I didn't know the snakes were there," he chuckled. "I hadn't dreamed there were a half so many snakes in the whole world as there were along that confounded river. I slept sitting up, dressed in rubber wading boots that came to my waist, and wore thick leather gloves. I got out of the country at the earliest possible moment."

When they entered the edge of the Miette clearing and

saw the glow of lights ahead of them, Aldous caught the sudden upturn of his companion's face, laughing at him in the starlight.

"Kind, thoughtful John Aldous!" she whispered, as if to herself. "How nice of you it was to talk of such pleasant things while we were coming through that black, dreadful swamp—with a Bill Quade waiting for us on the side!"

A low ripple of laughter broke from her lips, and he stopped dead in his tracks, forgetting to put the automatic back in his pocket. At sight of it the amusement died in her face. She caught his arm, and one of her hands seized the cold steel of the pistol.

"Would he—*dare?*" she demanded.

"You can't tell," replied Aldous, putting the gun in his pocket. "And that was a creepy sort of conversation to load you down with, wasn't it, Ladygray? I imagine you'll catch me in all sorts of blunders like that." He pointed ahead. "There's Mrs. Otto now. She's looking this way and wondering with all her big heart if you ought not to be at home and in bed."

The door of the Otto home was wide open, and silhouetted in the flood of light was the good-natured Scotchwoman. Aldous gave the whistling signal which she and her menfolk always recognized, and hurried on with Joanne.

Before they had quite reached the tent-house, Joanne put a detaining hand on his arm.

"I don't want you to go back to the cabin to-night," she said. "The face at the window—was terrible. I am afraid. I don't want you to be there alone."

Her words sent a warm glow through him.

"Nothing will happen," he assured her. "Quade will not come back."

"I don't want you to return to the cabin," she persisted "Is there no other place where you can stay?"

"I might go down and console Stevens, and borrow a couple of his horse blankets for a bed if that will please you."

"It will," she cried quickly. "If you don't return to the cabin you may go on to Tête Jaune with me to-morrow. Is it a bargain?"

"It is!" he accepted eagerly. "I don't like to be chased out, but I'll promise not to sleep in the cabin to-night."

Mrs. Otto was advancing to meet them. At the door he bade them good-night, and walked on in the direction of the lighted avenue of tents and shacks under the trees. He caught a last look in Joanne's eyes of anxiety and fear. Glancing back out of the darkness that swallowed him up, he saw her pause for a moment in the lighted doorway, and look in his direction. His heart beat faster. Joyously he laughed under his breath. It was strangely new and pleasing to have some one thinking of him in that way.

He had not intended to go openly into the lighted avenue. From the moment he had plunged out into the night after Quade, his fighting blood was roused. He had subdued it while with Joanne, but his determination to find Quade and have a settlement with him had grown no less. He told himself that he was one of the few men along the line whom it would be difficult for Quade to harm in other than a physical way. He had no business that could be destroyed by the other's underground methods, and he had no job to lose. Until he had seen

Joanne enter the scoundrel's red-and-white striped tent he had never hated a man as he now hated Quade. He had loathed him before, and had evaded him because the sight of him was unpleasant; now he wanted to grip his fingers around his thick red throat. He had meant to come up behind Quade's tent, but changed his mind and walked into the lighted trail between the two rows of tents and shacks, his hands thrust carelessly into his trousers pockets. The night carnival of the railroad builders was on. Coarse laughter, snatches of song, the click of pool balls and the chink of glasses mingled with the thrumming of three or four musical instruments along the lighted way. The phonograph in Quade's place was going incessantly. Half a dozen times Aldous paused to greet men whom he knew. He noted that there was nothing new or different in their manner toward him. If they had heard of his trouble with Quade, he was certain they would have spoken of it, or at least would have betrayed some sign. For several minutes he stopped to talk with MacVeigh, a young Scotch surveyor. MacVeigh hated Quade, but he made no mention of him. Purposely he passed Quade's tent and walked to the end of the street, nodding and looking closely at those whom he knew. It was becoming more and more evident to him that Quade and his pals were keeping the affair of the afternoon as quiet as possible. Stevens had heard of it. He wondered how.

Aldous retraced his steps. As though nothing had happened, he entered Quade's place. There were a dozen men inside, and among them he recognized three who had been there that afternoon. He nodded to them. Slim Barker was in Quade's place behind the counter. Barker was

Quade's right-hand man at Miette, and there was a glitter in his rat-like eyes as Aldous leaned over the glass case at one end of the counter and asked for cigars. He fumbled a bit as he picked out half a dollar's worth from the box. His eyes met Slim's.

"Where is Quade?" he asked casually.

Barker shrugged his shoulders.

"Busy to-night," he answered shortly. "Want to see him?"

"No, not particularly. Only—I don't want him to hold a grudge."

Barker replaced the box in the case and turned away. After lighting a cigar Aldous went out. He was sure that Quade had not returned from the river. Was he lying in wait for him near the cabin? The thought sent a sudden thrill through him. In the same breath it was gone. With half a dozen men ready to do his work, Aldous knew that Quade would not redden his own hands or place himself in any conspicuous risk. During the next hour he visited the places where Quade was most frequently seen. He had made up his mind to walk over to the engineers' camp, when a small figure darted after him out of the gloom of the trees.

It was Stevens' boy.

"Dad wants to see you down at the camp," he whispered excitedly. "He says right away—an' for no one to see you. He said not to let any one see me. I've been waiting for you to come out in the dark."

"Skip back and tell him I'll come," replied Aldous quickly. "Be sure you mind what he says—and don't let any one see you!"

The boy disappeared like a rabbit. Aldous looked back, and ahead, and then dived into the darkness after him.

A quarter of an hour later he came out on the river close to Stevens' camp. A little nearer he saw Stevens squatted close to a smouldering fire about which he was drying some clothes. The boy was huddled in a disconsolate heap near him. Aldous called softly, and Stevens slowly rose and stretched himself. The packer advanced to where he had screened himself behind a clump of bush. His first look at the other assured him that he was right in using caution. The moon had risen, and the light of it fell in the packer's face. It was a dead, stonelike gray. His cheeks seemed thinner than when Aldous had seen him a few hours before and there was despair in the droop of his shoulders. His eyes were what startled Aldous. They were like coals of fire, and shifted swiftly from point to point in the bush. For a moment they stood silent.

"Sit down," Stevens said then. "Get out of the moonlight. I've got something to tell you."

They crouched behind the bush.

"You know what happened," Stevens said, in a low voice. "I lost my outfit."

"Yes, I saw what happened, Stevens."

The packer hesitated for a moment. One of his big hands reached out and gripped John Aldous by the arm.

"Let me ask you something before I go on," he whispered. "You won't take offence—because it's necessary. She looked like an angel to me when I saw her up at the train. But you *know*. Is she good, or—— You know what we think of women who come in here alone. That's why I ask."

"She's what you thought she was, Stevens," replied Aldous. "As pure and as sweet as she looks. The kind we like to fight for."

"I was sure of it, Aldous. That's why I sent the kid for you. I saw her in your cabin—after the outfit went to hell. When I come back to camp, Quade was here. I was pretty well broken up. Didn't talk to him much. But he seen I had lost everything. Then he went on down to your place. He told me that later. But I guessed it soon as he come back. I never see him look like he did then. I'll cut it short. He's mad—loon mad—over that girl. I played the sympathy act, thinkin' of you—an' *her*. He hinted at some easy money. I let him understand that at the present writin' I'd be willing to take money most any way, and that I didn't have any particular likin' for you. Then it come out. He made me a proposition."

Stevens lowered his voice, and stopped to peer again about the bush.

"Go on," urged Aldous. "We're alone."

Stevens bent so near that his tobacco-laden breath swept his companion's cheek.

"He said he'd replace my lost outfit if I'd put you out of the way some time day after to-morrow!"

"Kill me?"

"Yes."

For a few moments there was a silence broken only by their tense breathing. Aldous had found the packer's hand. He was gripping it hard.

"Thank you, old man," he said. "And he believes you will do it?"

"I told him I would—day after to-morrow—an' throw your body in the Athabasca."

"Splendid, Stevens! You've got Sherlock Holmes beat by a mile! And does he want you to do this pretty job because I gave him a crack on the jaw?"

"Not a bit of it!" exclaimed Stevens quickly. "He knows the girl is a stranger and alone. You've taken an interest in her. With you out of the way, she won't be missed. Dammit, man, don't you know his system? And, if he ever wanted anything in his life he wants her. She's turned that poison-blood of his into fire. He raved about her here. He'll go the limit. He'll do anything to get her. He's so crazy I believe he'd give every dollar he's got. There's just one thing for you to do. Send the girl back where she come from. Then you get out. As for myself—I'm goin' to emigrate. Ain't got a dollar now, so I might as well hit for the prairies an' get a job on a ranch. Next winter I guess me 'n the kid will trap up on the Parsnip River."

"You're wrong—clean wrong," said Aldous quietly. "When I saw your outfit going down among the rocks I had already made up my mind to help you. What you've told me to-night hasn't made any difference. I would have helped you anyway, Stevens. I've got more money than I know what to do with right now. Roper has a thirty-horse outfit for sale. Buy it to-morrow. I'll pay for it, and you needn't consider yourself a dollar in debt. Some day I'll have you take me on a long trip, and that will make up for it. As for the girl and myself—we're going on to Tête Jaune to-morrow."

Aldous could see the amazed packer staring at him in

the gloom. "You don't think I'm sellin' myself, do you, Aldous?" he asked huskily. "That ain't why you're doin' this—for me 'n the kid—is it?"

"I had made up my mind to do it before I saw you to-night," repeated Aldous. "I've got lots of money, and I don't use but a little of it. It sometimes accumulates so fast that it bothers me. Besides, I've promised to accept payment for the outfit in trips. These mountains have got a hold on me, Stevens. I'm going to take a good many trips before I die."

"Not if you go on to Tête Jaune, you ain't," replied Stevens, biting a huge quid from a black plug.

Aldous had risen to his feet. Stevens stood up beside him.

"If you go on to Tête Jaune you're a bigger fool than I was in tryin' to swim the outfit across the river to-day," he added. "Listen!" He leaned toward Aldous, his eyes gleaming. "In the last six months there's been forty dead men dragged out of the Frazer between Tête Jaune an' Fort George. You know that. The papers have called 'em accidents—the 'toll of railroad building.' Mebby a part of it is. Mebby a half of them forty died by accident. The other half didn't. They were sent down by Culver Rann and Bill Quade. Once you go floatin' down the Frazer there ain't no questions asked. Somebody sees you an' pulls you out—mebby a Breed or an Indian—an' puts you under a little sand a bit later. If it's a white man he does likewise. There ain't no time to investigate floaters over-particular in the wilderness. Besides, you git so beat up in the rocks you don't look like much of anything. I know, because I worked on the

scows three months, an' helped bury four of 'em. An' there wasn't anything, not even a scrap of paper, in the pockets of two of 'em! Is that suspicious, or ain't it? It don't pay to talk too much along the Frazer. Men keep their mouths shut. But I'll tell you this: Culver Rann an' Bill Quade know a lot."

"And you think I'll go in the Frazer?"

"Egzactly. Quade would rather have you in there than in the Athabasca. And then——"

"Well?"

Stevens spat into the bush, and shrugged his shoulders. "This beautiful lady you've taken an interest in will turn up missing, Aldous. She'll disappear off the face of the map—just like Stimson's wife did. You remember Stimson?"

"He was found in the Frazer," said Aldous, gripping the other's arm in the darkness.

"Egzactly. An' that pretty wife of his disappeared a little later. Up there everybody's too busy to ask where other people go. Culver Rann an' Bill Quade know what happened to Stimson, an' they know what happened to Stimson's wife. You don't want to go to Tête Jaune. You don't want to let *her* go. I know what I'm talking about. Because——"

There fell a moment's silence. Aldous waited. Stevens spat again, and finished in a whisper:

"Quade went to Tête Jaune to-night. He went on a hand-car. He's got something he wants to tell Culver Rann that he don't dare telephone or telegraph. An' he wants to get that something to him ahead of to-morrow's train. Understand?"

CHAPTER VIII

JOHN ALDOUS confessed to himself that he did not quite understand, in spite of the effort Stevens had made to impress upon him, the importance of not going to Tête Jaune. He was bewildered over a number of things, and felt that he needed to be alone for a time to clear his mind. He left Stevens, promising to return later to share a couple of blankets and a part of his tepee, for he was determined to keep his promise to Joanne, and not return to his own cabin, even though Quade had left Miette. He followed a moonlit trail along the river to an abandoned surveyors' camp, knowing that he would meet no one, and that in this direction he would have plenty of unbroken quiet in which to get some sort of order out of the chaotic tangle of events through which he had passed that day.

Aldous had employed a certain amount of caution, but until he had talked with Stevens he had not believed that Quade, in his twofold desire to avenge himself and possess Joanne, would go to the extraordinary ends predicted by the packer. His point of view was now entirely changed. He believed Stevens. He knew the man was not excitable. He was one of the coolest heads in the mountains. And he had abundant nerve. Thought of Stimson and Stimson's wife had sent the hot blood through Aldous like fire. Was Stevens right in that detail? And was Quade actually

planning the same end for him and Joanne? Why had Quade stolen on ahead to Tête Jaune? Why had he not waited for to-morrow's train?

He found himself walking swiftly along the road, where he had intended to walk slowly—a hundred questions pounding through his brain. Suddenly a thought came to him that stopped him in the trail, his unseeing eyes staring down into the dark chasm of the river. After all, was it so strange that Quade would do these things? Into his own life Joanne had come like a wonderful dream-creature transformed into flesh and blood. He no longer tried to evade the fact that he could not think without thinking of Joanne. She had become a part of him. She had made him forget everything but her, and in a few hours had sent into the dust of ruin his cynicism and aloneness of a lifetime. If Joanne had come to him like this, making him forget his work, filling him more and more with the thrilling desire to fight for her, was it so very strange that a beast like Quade would fight—in another way?

He went on down the trail, his hands clenched tightly. After all, it was not fear of Quade or of what he might attempt that filled him with uneasiness. It was Joanne herself, her strange quest, its final outcome. With the thought that she was seeking for the man who was her husband, a leaden hand seemed gripping at his heart. He tried to shake it off, but it was like a sickness. To believe that she had been the wife of another man or that she could ever belong to any other man than himself seemed like shutting his eyes forever to the sun. And yet she had told him. She had belonged to another man; she might

belong to him even now. She had come to find if he was alive—or dead.

And if alive? Aldous stopped again, and looked down into the dark pit through which the river was rushing a hundred feet below him. It tore in frothing maelstroms through a thousand rocks, filling the night with a low thunder. To John Aldous the sound of it might have been a thousand miles away. He did not hear. His eye saw nothing in the blackness. For a few moments the question he had asked himself obliterated everything. If they found Joanne's husband alive at Tête Jaune—what then? He turned back, retracing his steps over the trail, a feeling of resentment—of hatred for the man he had never seen—slowly taking the place of the oppressive thing that had turned his heart sick within him. Then, in a flash, came the memory of Joanne's words—words in which, white-faced and trembling, she had confessed that her anxiety was not that she would find him dead, but that *she would find him alive.* A joyous thrill shot through him as he remembered that. Whoever this man was, whatever he might have been to her once, or was to her now, Joanne did not want to find him alive! He laughed softly to himself as he quickened his pace. The tense grip of his fingers loosened. The grim, almost ghastly part of it did not occur to him—the fact that deep in his soul he was wishing a man dead and in his grave.

He did not return at once to the scenes about Quade's place, but went to the station, three quarters of a mile farther up the track. Here, in a casual way, he learned from the little pink-faced Cockney Englishman who watched the office at night that Stevens had been correct

in his information. Quade had gone to Tête Jaune. Although it was eleven o'clock, Aldous proceeded in the direction of the engineers' camp, still another quarter of a mile deeper in the bush. He was restless. He did not feel that he could sleep that night. The engineers' camp he expected to find in darkness, and he was surprised when he saw a light burning brightly in Keller's cabin.

Keller was the assistant divisional engineer, and they had become good friends. It was Keller who had set the first surveyor's line at Tête Jaune, and it was he who had reported it as the strategic point from which to push forward the fight against mountain and wilderness, both by river and rail. He was, in a way, accountable for the existence of Tête Jaune just where it did exist, and he knew more about it than any other man in the employ of the Grand Trunk Pacific. For this reason Aldous was glad that Keller had not gone to bed. He knocked at the door and entered without waiting for an invitation.

The engineer stood in the middle of the floor, his coat off, his fat, stubby hands thrust into the pockets of his baggy trousers, his red face and bald cranium shining in the lamplight. A strange fury blazed in his eyes as he greeted his visitor. He began pacing back and forth across the room, puffing volumes of smoke from a huge bowled German pipe as he motioned Aldous to a chair.

"What's the matter, Peter?"

"Enough—an' be damned!" growled Peter. "If it wasn't enough do you think I'd be out of bed at this hour of the night?"

"I'm sure it's enough," agreed Aldous. "If it wasn't you'd be in your little trundle over there, sleeping like a

baby. I don't know of any one who can sleep quite as sweetly as you, Peter. But what the devil *is* the trouble?"

"Something that you can't make me feel funny over. You haven't heard—about the bear?"

"Not a word, Peter."

Keller took his hands from his pockets and the big-bowled pipe from his mouth.

"You know what I did with that bear," he said. "More than a year ago I made friends with her up there on the hill instead of killing her. Last summer I got her so she'd eat out of my hands. I fed her a barrel of sugar between July and November. We used to chum it an hour at a time, and I'd pet her like a dog. Why, damn it, man, I thought more of that bear than I did of any human in these regions! And she got so fond of me she didn't leave to den up until January. This spring she came out with two cubs, an' as soon as they could waddle she brought 'em out there on the hillside an' waited for me. We were better chums than ever. I've got another half barrel of sugar—lump sugar—on the way from Edmonton. An' now what do you think that damned C. N. R. gang has done?"

"They haven't shot her?"

"No, they haven't shot her. I wish to God they had! They've *blown her up!*"

The little engineer subsided into a chair.

"Do you hear?" he demanded. "They've blown her up! Put a stick of dynamite under some sugar, attached a battery wire to it, an' when she was licking up the sugar touched it off. An' I can't do anything, damn 'em! Bears ain't protected. The government of this province

calls 'em 'pests.' Murder 'em on sight, it says. An' those fiends over there think it's a good joke on me—an' the bear!"

Keller was sweating. His fat hands were clenched, and his round, plump body fairly shook with excitement and anger.

"When I went over to-night they laughed at me—the whole bunch," he went on thickly. "I offered to lick every man in the outfit from A to Z, an' I ain't had a fight in twenty years. Instead of fighting like men, a dozen of them grabbed hold of me, chucked me into a blanket, an' bounced me for fifteen minutes straight! What do you think of *that*, Aldous? Me—assistant divisional engineer of the G. T. P.—*bounced in a blanket!*"

Peter Keller hopped from his chair and began pacing back and forth across the room again, sucking truculently on his pipe.

"If they were on our road I'd—I'd chase every man of them out of the country. But they're not. They belong to the C. N. R. They're out of my reach." He stopped, suddenly, in front of Aldous. "What can I do?" he demanded.

"Nothing," said Aldous. "You've had something like this coming to you, Peter. I've been expecting it. All the camps for twenty miles up and down the line know what you thought of that bear. You fired Tibbits because, as you said, he was too thick with Quade. You told him that right before Quade's face. Tibbits is now foreman of that grading gang over there. Two and two make four, you know. Tibbits—Quade—the blown-up bear. Quade doesn't miss an opportunity, no matter how

small it is. Tibbits and Quade did this to get even with you. You might report the blanket affair to the contractors of the other road. I don't believe they would stand for it."

Aldous had guessed correctly what the effect of associating Quade's name with the affair would be. Keller was one of Quade's deadliest enemies. He sat down close to Aldous again. His eyes burned deep back. It was not Keller's physique, but his brain, and the fearlessness of his spirit, that made him dangerous.

"I guess you're right, Aldous," he said. "Some day—I'll even up on Quade."

"And so shall I, Peter."

The engineer stared into the other's eyes.

"You——"

Aldous nodded.

"Quade left for Tête Jaune to-night, on a hand-car. I follow him to-morrow, on the train. I can't tell you what's up, Peter, but I don't think it will stop this side of death for Quade and Culver Rann—or me. I mean that quite literally. I don't see how more than one side can come out alive. I want to ask you a few questions before I go on to Tête Jaune. You know every mountain and trail about the place, don't you?"

"I've tramped them all, afoot and horseback."

"Then perhaps you can direct me to what I must find—a man's grave."

Peter Keller paused in the act of relighting his pipe. For a moment he stared in amazement.

"There are a great many graves up at Tête Jaune," he said, at last. "A great many graves—and many of them

unmarked. If it's a *Quade* grave you're looking for, Aldous, it will be unmarked."

"I am quite sure that it is marked—or *was* at one time," said Aldous. "It's the grave of a man who had quite an unusual name, Peter, and you might remember it—Mortimer FitzHugh."

"FitzHugh—FitzHugh," repeated Keller, puffing out fresh volumes of smoke. "Mortimer FitzHugh——"

"He died, I believe, before there was a Tête Jaune, or at least before the steel reached there," added Aldous. "He was on a hunting trip, and I have reason to think that his death was a violent one."

Keller rose and fell into his old habit of pacing back and forth across the room, a habit that had worn a path in the bare pine boards of the floor.

"There's graves an' graves up there, but not so many that were there before Tête Jaune came," he began, between puffs. "Up on the side of White Knob Mountain there's the grave of a man who was torn to bits by a grizzly. But his name was Humphrey. Old Yellowhead John—Tête Jaune, they called him—died years before that, and no one knows where his grave is. We had five men die before the steel came, but there wasn't a FitzHugh among 'em. Crabby—old Crabby Tompkins, a trapper, is buried in the sand on the Frazer. The last flood swept his slab away. There's two unmarked graves in Glacier Canyon, but I guess they're ten years old if a day. Burns was shot. I knew him. Plenty died after the steel came, but before that——"

Suddenly he stopped. He faced Aldous. His breath came in quick jerks.

"By Heaven, I do remember!" he cried. "There's a mountain in the Saw Tooth Range, twelve miles from Tête Jaune—a mountain with the prettiest basin you ever saw at the foot of it, with a lake no bigger than this camp, and an old cabin which Yellowhead himself must have built fifty years ago. There's a blind canyon runs out of it, short an' dark, on the right. We found a grave there. I don't remember the first name on the slab. Mebby it was washed out. But, so 'elp me God, *the last name was FitzHugh!*"

With a sudden cry, Aldous jumped to his feet and caught Keller's arm.

"You're sure of it, Peter?"

"Positive!"

It was impossible for Aldous to repress his excitement. The engineer stared at him even harder than before.

"What can that grave have to do with Quade?" he asked. "The man died before Quade was known in these regions."

"I can't tell you now, Peter," replied Aldous, pulling the engineer to the table. "But I think you'll know quite soon. For the present, I want you to sketch out a map that will take me to the grave. Will you?"

On the table were pencil and paper. Keller seated himself and drew them toward him.

"I'm damned if I can see what that grave can have to do with Quade," he said; "but I'll tell you how to find it!"

For several minutes they bent low over the table, Peter Keller describing the trail to the Saw Tooth Mountain as he sketched it, step by step, on a sheet of office paper. When

it was done, Aldous folded it carefully and placed it in his wallet.

"I can't go wrong, and—thank you, Keller!"

After Aldous had gone, Peter Keller sat for some time in deep thought.

"Now I wonder what the devil there can be about a grave to make him so happy," he grumbled, listening to the whistle that was growing fainter down the trail.

And Aldous, alone, with the moon straight above him as he went back to the Miette Plain, felt, in truth, this night had become brighter for him than any day he had ever known. For he knew that Peter Keller was not a man to make a statement of which he was not sure. Mortimer FitzHugh was dead. His bones lay under the slab up in that little blind canyon in the shadow of the Saw Tooth Mountain. To-morrow he would tell Joanne. And, blindly, he told himself that she would be glad.

Still whistling, he passed the Chinese laundry shack on the creek, crossed the railroad tracks, and buried himself in the bush beyond. A quarter of an hour later he stole quietly into Stevens' camp and went to bed.

CHAPTER IX

STEVENS, dreaming of twenty horses plunging to death among the rocks in the river, slept uneasily. He awoke before it was dawn, but when he dragged himself from his tepee, moving quietly not to awaken his boy, he found John Aldous on his knees before a small fire, slicing thin rashers of bacon into a frying-pan. The weight of his loss was in the tired packer's eyes and face and the listless droop of his shoulders. John Aldous, with three hours between the blankets to his credit, was as cheery as the crackling fire itself. He had wanted to whistle for the last half-hour. Seeing Stevens, he began now.

"I wasn't going to rouse you until breakfast was ready," he interrupted himself to say. "I heard you groaning, Stevens. I know you had a bad night. And the kid, too. He couldn't sleep. But I made up my mind you'd have to get up early. I've got a lot of business on to-day, and we'll have to rouse Curly Roper out of bed to buy his pack outfit. Find the coffee, will you? I couldn't."

For a moment Stevens stood over him.

"See here, Aldous, you didn't mean what you said last night, did you? You didn't mean—that?"

"Confound it, yes! Can't you understand plain English, Stevens? Don't you believe a man when he's a gentleman? Buy that outfit! Why, I'd buy twenty outfits to-day, I'm—I'm feeling so fine, Stevens!"

For the first time in forty-eight hours Stevens smiled.

"I was wondering if I hadn't been dreaming," he said. "Once, a long time ago, I guess I felt just like you do now."

With which cryptic remark he went for the coffee.

Aldous looked up in time to see the boy stagger sleepily out of the tepee. There was something pathetic about the motherlessness of the picture, and he understood a little of what Stevens had meant.

An hour later, with breakfast over, they started for Curly's. Curly was pulling on his boots when they arrived, while his wife was frying the inevitable bacon in the kitchen.

"I hear you have some horses for sale, Curly," said Aldous.

"Hi 'ave."

"How many?"

"Twenty-nine, 'r twenty-eight—mebby twenty-seven."

"How much?"

Curly looked up from the task of pulling on his second boot.

"H'are you buying 'orses or looking for hinformation?" he asked.

"I'm buying, and I'm in a hurry. How much do you want a head?"

"Sixty, 'r six——"

"I'll give you sixty dollars apiece for twenty-eight head, and that's just ten dollars apiece more than they're worth," broke in Aldous, pulling a check-book and a fountain pen from his pocket. "Is it a go?"

A little stupefied by the suddenness of it all, Curly opened his mouth and stared.

"Is it a go?" repeated Aldous. "Including blankets, saddles, pack-saddles, ropes, and canvases?"

Curly nodded, looking from Aldous to Stevens to see if he could detect anything that looked like a joke.

"Hit's a go," he said.

Aldous handed him a check for sixteen hundred and eighty dollars.

"Make out the bill of sale to Stevens," he said. "I'm paying for them, but they're Stevens' horses. And, look here, Curly, I'm buying them only with your agreement that you'll say nothing about who paid for them. Will you agree to that?"

Curly was joyously looking at the check.

"Gyve me a Bible," he demanded. "Hi'll swear Stevens p'id for them! I give you the word of a Hinglish gentleman!"

Without another word Aldous opened the cabin door and was gone, leaving Stevens quite as much amazed as the little Englishman whom everybody called Curly, because he had no hair.

Aldous went at once to the station, and for the first time inquired into the condition that was holding back the Tête Jaune train. He found that a slide had given way, burying a section of track under gravel and rock. A hundred men were at work clearing it away, and it was probable they would finish by noon. A gang boss, who had come back with telegraphic reports, said that half a dozen men had carried Quade's hand-car over the obstruction about midnight.

It was seven o'clock when Aldous left for the Miette bottom. He believed that Joanne would be up. At this

season of the year the first glow of day usually found the Ottos at breakfast, and for half an hour the sun had been shining on the top of Pyramid Mountain. He was eager to tell her what had passed between him and Keller. He laughed softly when he confessed to himself how madly he wanted to see her.

He always liked to come up to the Otto home very early of a morning, or in the dusk of evening. Very frequently he was filled with a desire to stand outside the red-and-white striped walls of the tent-house and listen unseen. Inside there was always cheer: at night the crackle of fire and the glow of light, the happy laughter of the gentle-hearted Scotchwoman, and the affectionate banter of her "big mountain man," who looked more like a brigand than the luckiest and most contented husband in the mountains—the luckiest, quite surely, with the one exception of his brother Clossen, who had, by some occult strategy or other, induced a sweet-faced and aristocratic little woman to look upon his own honest physiognomy as the handsomest and finest in the world. This morning Aldous followed a narrow path that brought him behind the tent-house. He heard no voices. A few steps more and he emerged upon a scene that stopped him and set his heart thumping.

Less than a dozen paces away stood Mrs. Otto and Joanne, their backs toward him. They were gazing silently and anxiously in the direction of the thick, low bush across the clearing, through which led the trail to his cabin. He did not look toward the bush. His eyes were upon Joanne. Her slender figure was full in the golden radiance of the morning sun, and Aldous felt himself under

the spell of a joyous wonder as he looked at her. For the first time he saw her hair as he had pictured it—as he had given it to that other *Joanne* in the book he had called "Fair Play." She had been brushing it in the sun when he came, but now she stood poised in that tense and waiting attitude—silent—gazing in the direction of the bush, with that marvellous mantle sweeping about her in a shimmering silken flood. He would not have moved, nor would he have spoken, until Joanne herself broke the spell. She turned, and saw him. With a little cry of surprise she flung back her hair. He could not fail to see the swift look of relief and gladness that had come into her eyes. In another instant her face was flushing crimson.

"I beg your pardon for coming up like an eavesdropper," he apologized. "I thought you would just about be at breakfast, Mrs. Otto."

The Scotchwoman heaved a tremendous sigh of relief.

"Goodness gracious, but I'm glad to see you!" she exclaimed thankfully. "Jack and Bruce have just gone out to see if they could find your dead body!"

"We thought perhaps something might have happened," said Joanne, who had moved nearer the door. "You will excuse me, won't you, while I finish my hair?"

Without waiting for him to answer, she ran into the tent. No sooner had she disappeared than the good-natured smile left Mrs. Otto's face. There was a note of alarm in her low voice as she whispered:

"Jack and Bruce went to the barn last night, and she slept with me. She tried to be quiet, but I know she didn't sleep much. And she cried. I couldn't hear her,

but the pillow was wet. Once my hand touched her cheek, and it was wet. I didn't ask any questions. This morning, at breakfast, she told us everything that happened, all about Quade—and your trouble. She told us about Quade looking in at the window, and she was so nervous thinking something might have happened to you last night that the poor dear couldn't even drink her coffee until Jack and Bruce went out to hunt for you. But I don't think that was why she cried!"

"I wish it had been," said Aldous. "It makes me happy to think she was worried about—me."

"Good Lord!" gasped Mrs. Otto.

He looked for a moment into the slow-growing amazement and understanding in her kind eyes.

"You will keep my little secret, won't you, Mrs. Otto?" he asked. "Probably you'll think it's queer. I've only known her a day. But I feel—like that. Somehow I feel that in telling this to you I am confiding in a mother, or a sister. I want you to understand why I'm going on to Tête Jaune with her. That is why she was crying—because of the dread of something up there. I'm going with her. She shouldn't go alone."

Voices interrupted them, and they turned to find that Jack and Bruce Otto had come out of the bush and were quite near. Aldous was sorry that Joanne had spoken of his trouble with Quade. He did not want to discuss the situation, or waste time in listening to further advice. He was anxious to be alone again with Joanne, and tell her what he had learned from Peter Keller. For half an hour he repressed his uneasiness. The brothers then went on to their corral. A few minutes later Joanne was once

more at his side, and they were walking slowly over the trail that led to the cabin on the river.

He could see that the night had made a change in her. There were circles under her eyes which were not there yesterday. When she looked at him their velvety blue depths betrayed something which he knew she was struggling desperately to keep from him. It was not altogether fear. It was more a betrayal of pain—a torment of the soul and not of the body. He noticed that in spite of the vivid colouring of her lips her face was strangely pale. The beautiful flush that had come into it when she first saw him was gone.

Then he began to tell her of his visit to Peter Keller. His own heart was beating violently when he came to speak of the grave and the slab over it that bore the name of FitzHugh. He had expected that what he had discovered from Keller would create some sort of a sensation. He had even come up to the final fact gradually, so that it would not appear bald and shocking. Joanne's attitude stunned him. She looked straight ahead. When she turned to him he did not see in her eyes what he had expected to see. They were quiet, emotionless, except for that shadow of inward torture which did not leave them.

"Then to-morrow we can go to the grave?" she asked simply.

Her voice, too, was quiet and without emotion.

He nodded. "We can leave at sunrise," he said. "I have my own horses at Tête Jaune and there need be no delay. We were to start into the North from there."

"You mean on the adventure you were telling me about?"

She had looked at him quickly.

"Yes. Old Donald, my partner, has been waiting for me a week. That's why I was so deuced anxious to rush the book to an end. I'm behind Donald's schedule, and he's growing nervous. It's rather an unusual enterprise that's taking us north this time, and Donald can't understand why I should hang back to write the tail end of a book. He has lived sixty years in the mountains. His full name is Donald MacDonald. Sometimes, back in my own mind, I've called him History. He seems like that—as though he'd lived for ages in these mountains instead of sixty years. If I could only write what he has lived—even what one might imagine that he has lived! But I cannot. I have tried three times, and have failed. I think of him as The Last Spirit—a strange wandering ghost of the mighty ranges. His kind passed away a hundred years ago. You will understand—when you see him."

She put her hand on his arm and let it rest there lightly as they walked. Into her eyes had returned some of the old warm glow of yesterday.

"I want you to tell me about this adventure," she entreated softly. "I understand—about the other. You have been good—oh! so good to me! And I should tell you things; you are expecting me to explain. It is only fair and honest that I should. I know what is in your mind, and I only want you to wait—until to-morrow. Will you? And I will tell you then, when we have found the grave."

Involuntarily his hand sought Joanne's. For a single moment he felt the warm, sweet thrill of it in his own as he

pressed it more closely to his arm. Then he freed it, looking straight ahead. A soft flush grew in Joanne's cheeks.

"Do you care a great deal for riches?" he asked. "Does the golden pot at the end of the rainbow hold out a lure for you?" He did not realize the strangeness of his question until their eyes met. "Because if you don't," he added, smiling, "this adventure of ours isn't going to look very exciting to you."

She laughed softly.

"No, I don't care for riches," she replied. "I am quite sure that just as great education proves to one how little one knows, so great wealth brings one face to face with the truth of how little one can enjoy. My father used to say that the golden treasure at the end of the rainbow in every human life was happiness, and that is something which you cannot buy. So why crave riches, then? But please don't let my foolish ideas disappoint you. I'll promise to be properly excited."

She saw his face suddenly aflame with enthusiasm.

"By George, but you're a—a brick, Joanne!" he exclaimed. "You are! And I—I——" He was fumbling in his breast pocket. He brought out his wallet and extracted from it the bit of paper Stevens had given him. "You dropped that, and Stevens found it," he explained, giving it to her. "I thought those figures might represent your fortune—or your income. Don't mind telling you I went over 'em carefully. There's a mistake in the third column. Five and four don't make seven. They make nine. In the final, when you come to the multiplication part of it, that correction will make you just thirty-two thousand five hundred dollars richer."

"Thanks," said Joanne, lowering her eyes, and beginning to tear the paper into small pieces. "And will it disappoint *you*, Mr. John Aldous, if I tell you that all these figures stand for riches which some one else possesses? And won't you let me remind you that we're getting a long way from what I want to know—about your trip into the North?"

"That's just it: we're hot on the trail," chuckled Aldous, deliberately placing her hand on his arm again. "You don't care for riches. Neither do I. I'm delighted to know we're going tandem in that respect. I've never had any fun with money. It's the money that's had fun with me. I've no use for yachts and diamonds and I'd rather travel afoot with a gun over my shoulder than in a private car. Half the time I'm doing my own cooking, and I haven't worn a white shirt in a year. My publishers persist in shoving more money my way than I know what to do with.

"You see, I pay only ten cents a plug for my smoking tobacco, and other things accordingly. Somebody has said something about the good Lord sitting up in Heaven and laughing at the jokes He plays on men. Well, I'm sitting back and laughing now and then at the tussle between men and money over all creation. There's a whole lot of humour in the way men and women fight and die for money, if you only take time to stand out on the side and look on. There's nothing big or dramatic about it. I may be a heathen, but to my mind the funniest of all things is to see the world wringing its neck for a dollar. And Donald—old History—needs even less money than I. So that puts the big element of humour in this expedition

of ours. We don't want money, particularly. Donald wouldn't wear more than four pairs of boots a year if he was a billionaire. And yet——"

He turned to Joanne. The pressure of her hand was warmer on his arm. Her beautiful eyes were glowing, and her red lips parted as she waited breathlessly for him to go on.

"And yet, we're going to a place where you can scoop gold up with a shovel," he finished. "That's the funny part of it."

"It isn't funny—it's tremendous!" gasped Joanne. "Think of what a man like you could do with unlimited wealth, the good you might achieve, the splendid endowments you might make——"

"I have already made several endowments," interrupted Aldous. "I believe that I have made a great many people happy, Ladygray—a great many. I am gifted to make endowments, I think, above most people. Not one of the endowments I have made has failed of complete success."

"And may I ask what some of them were?"

"I can't remember them all. There have been a great, great many. Most conspicuous among them were three endowments which I made to some very worthy people at various times for seven salted mines. I suppose you know what a salted mine is, Ladygray? At other times I have endowed railroad stocks which were very much in need of my helping mite, two copper companies, a concern that was supposed to hoist up pure asbestos from the stomach of Popocatapetl, and a steamship company that never steamed. As I said before, they were all very successful endowments."

"And how many of the other kind have you made?" she asked gently, looking down the trail. "Like—Stevens', for instance?"

He turned to her sharply.

"What the deuce——"

"Did you succeed in getting the new outfit from Mr. Curly?" she asked.

"Yes. How did you know?"

She smiled at the amazement which had gathered in his face. A glad, soft light shone in her eyes.

"I guess Mrs. Otto has been like a mother to that poor little boy," she explained. "When you and Mr. Stevens went up to buy the outfit this morning Jimmy ran over to tell her the news. We were all there—at breakfast. He was so excited he could scarcely breathe. But it all came out, and he ran back to camp before you came because he thought you wouldn't want me to know. Wasn't that funny? He told me so when I walked a little way up the path with him."

"The little reprobate!" chuckled Aldous. "He's the best publicity man I ever had, Ladygray. I did want you to know about this, and I wanted it to come to you in just this way, so that I wouldn't be compelled to tell you myself of the big and noble act I have done. It was my hope and desire that you, through some one else, would learn of it, and come to understand more fully what a generous and splendid biped I am. I even plotted to give this child of Stevens' a silver dollar if he would get the news to you in some one of his innocent ways. He's done it. And he couldn't have done it better—even for a dollar. Ah, here we are at the cabin. Will you excuse

me while I pick up a few things that I want to take on to Tête Jaune with me?"

Between two trees close to the cabin he had built a seat, and here he left Joanne. He was gone scarcely five minutes when he reappeared with a small pack-sack over his shoulders, locked the door, and rejoined her.

"You see it isn't much of a task for me to move," he said, as they turned back in the direction of the Ottos'. "I'll wash the dishes when I come back next October."

"Five months!" gasped Joanne, counting on her fingers. "John Aldous, do you mean——"

"I do," he nodded emphatically. "I frequently leave dishes unwashed for quite a spell at a time. That's the one unpleasant thing about this sort of life—washing dishes. It's not so bad in the rainy season, but it's fierce during a dry spell. When it rains I put the dishes out on a flat rock, dirty side up, and the good Lord does the scrubbing."

He looked at Joanne, face and eyes aglow with the happiness that was sweeping in a mighty tumult within him. Half an hour had worked a transformation in Joanne. There was no longer a trace of anguish or of fear in her eyes. Their purity and limpid beauty made him think of the rock violets that grew high up on the mountains. Her lips and cheeks were flushed, and the soft pressure of her hand again resting on his arm filled him with the exquisite thrill of possession and joy. He did not speak of Tête Jaune again until they reached the Otto tent-house, and then only to assure her that he would call for her half an hour before the train was ready to leave.

As soon as possible after that he went to the telegraph

office and sent a long message to MacDonald. Among other things he told him to prepare their cabin for a lady guest. He knew this would shock the old mountain wanderer, but he also knew that Donald would follow his instructions in spite of whatever alarm he might have. There were other women at Tête Jaune, the wives of men he knew, to whom he might have taken Joanne. Under the conditions, however, he believed his own cabin would be her best refuge, at least for a day or so. In that time he could take some one into his confidence, probably Blackton and his wife. In fact, as he thought the circumstances over, he saw the necessity of confiding in the Blacktons that very night.

He left the station, growing a bit nervous. Was it right for him to take Joanne to his cabin at all? He had a tremendous desire to do so, chiefly on account of Quade. The cabin was a quarter of a mile in the bush, and he was positive if Joanne was there that Quade, and perhaps Culver Rann, would come nosing about. This would give him the opportunity of putting into execution a plan which he had already arranged for himself and old MacDonald. On the other hand, was this arrangement fair to Joanne, even though it gave him the chance to square up accounts with Quade?

He stopped abruptly, and faced the station. All at once there swept upon him a realization of how blind he had been, and what a fool he had almost made of himself. Blackton was one of the contractors who were working miracles in the mountains. He was a friend who would fight for him if necessary. Mrs. Blackton, who preferred to be on the firing line with her husband than in her

luxurious city home, was the leader of all that was decent and womanly in Tête Jaune. Why not have these friends meet them at the train and take Joanne direct to their house? Such recognition and friendship would mean everything to Joanne. To take her to his cabin would mean——

Inwardly he swore at himself as he hurried back to the station, and his face burned hotly as he thought of the chance such a blunder on his part would have given Quade and Culver Rann to circulate the stories with which they largely played their scoundrelly game. He sent another and longer telegram. This time it was to Blackton.

He ate dinner with Stevens, who had his new outfit ready for the mountains. It was two o'clock before he brought Joanne up to the station. She was dressed now as he had first seen her when she entered Quade's place. A veil covered her face. Through the gray film of it he caught the soft warm glow of her eyes and the shimmer of gold-brown tendrils of her hair. And he knew why she wore that veil. It set his heart beating swiftly—the fact that she was trying to hide from all eyes but his own a beauty so pure and wonderful that it made her uncomfortable when under the staring gaze of the Horde.

The hand that rested on his arm he pressed closer to his side as they walked up the station platform, and under his breath he laughed softly and joyously as he felt the thrill of it. He spoke no word. Not until they were in their seat in the coach did Joanne look at him after that pressure of her hand, and then she did not speak. But in the veiled glow of her eyes there was something that told him she understood—a light that was wonderfully gentle

and sweet. And yet, without words, she asked him to keep within his soul the things that were pounding madly there for speech.

As the train rolled on and the babble of voices about them joined the crunching rumble of the wheels, he wanted to lean close to her and tell her how a few hours had changed the world for him. And then, for a moment, her eyes turned to him again, and he knew that it would be a sacrilege to give voice to the things he wanted to say. For many minutes he was silent, gazing with her upon the wild panorama of mountain beauty as it drifted past the car window. A loud voice two seats ahead of them proclaimed that they were about to make Templeton's Curve. The man was talking to his companion.

"They shot up a hundred thousand pounds of black powder an' dynamite to make way for two hundred feet of steel on that curve," he explained in a voice heard all over the car. "They say you could hear the explosion fifty miles away. Jack Templeton was near-sighted, an' he didn't see a rock coming down on him that was half as big as a house. I helped scrape up what was left of 'im an' we planted him at this end of the curve. It's been Templeton's Curve ever since. You'll see his grave—with a slab over it!"

It was there almost as he spoke, marked by a white-painted cross in a circle of whitewashed stones. John Aldous felt a sudden shiver pass through his companion. She turned from the window. Through her veil he saw her lips tighten. Until he left the car half an hour later the man in the second seat ahead talked of Templeton's grave and a dozen other graves along the right of way.

He was a rock-hog, and a specialist on the subject of graves. Inwardly Aldous cursed him roundly. He cursed him all the way to Tête Jaune, for to him he attributed the change which had again come over Joanne.

This change she could only partly conceal from him under her veil. She asked him many questions about Tête Jaune and the Blacktons, and tried to take an interest in the scenery they were passing. In spite of this he could see that she was becoming more and more nervous as they progressed toward the end of their journey. He felt the slow dampening of his own joy, the deadening clutch of yesterday at his heart. Twice she lifted her veil for a moment and he saw she was pale and the tense lines had gathered about her mouth again. There was something almost haggard in her look the second time.

In the early dusk of evening they arrived at Tête Jaune. Aldous waited until the car had emptied itself before he rose from his seat. Joanne's hand clutched at his arm as they walked down the aisle. He felt the fierce pressure of her fingers in his flesh. On the car platform they paused for a moment, and he felt her throbbing beside him. She had taken her hand from his arm, and he turned suddenly. She had raised her veil. Her face was dead white. And she was staring out over the sea of faces under them in a strange questing way, and her breath came from between her slightly parted lips as if she had been running. Amazed for the moment, John Aldous did not move. Somewhere in that crowd *Joanne expected to find a face she knew!* The truth struck him dumb—made him inert and lifeless. He, too, stared as if in a trance.

And then, suddenly, every drop of blood in his body blazed into fierce life.

In the glow of one of the station lamps stood a group of men. The faces of all were turned toward them. One he recognized—a bloated, leering face grinning devilishly at them. It was Quade!

A low, frightened cry broke from Joanne's lips, and he knew that she, too, had seen him. But it was not Quade that she had looked for. It was not his face that she had expected to see nor because of him that she had lifted her veil for the mob!

He stepped down from the car and gave her his hand. Her fingers clutched his convulsively. And they were cold as the fingers of the dead.

CHAPTER X

A MOMENT later some one came surging through the crowd, and called Aldous by name. It was Blackton. His thin, genial face with its little spiked moustache rose above the sea of heads about him, and as he came he grinned a welcome.

"A beastly mob!" he exclaimed, as he gripped his friend's hand. "I'm sorry I couldn't bring my wife nearer than the back platform."

Aldous turned to Joanne. He was still half in a daze. His heart was choking him with its swift and excited beating. Even as he introduced her to Blackton the voice kept crying in his brain that she had expected to find some one in this crowd whom she knew. For a space it was as if the Joanne whom he had known had slipped away from him. She had told him about the grave, but this other she had kept from him. Something that was almost anger surged up in him. His face bore marks of the strain as he watched her greet Blackton. In an instant, it seemed to him, she had regained a part of her composure. Blackton saw nothing but the haggard lines about her eyes and the deep pallor in her face, which he ascribed to fatigue.

"You're tired, Miss Gray," he said. "It's a killing ride up from Miette these days. If we can get through this mob we'll have supper within fifteen minutes!"

With a word to Aldous he began worming his long, lean

body ahead of them. An instant Joanne's face was very close to Aldous', so close that he felt her breath, and a tendril of her hair touched his lips. In that instant her eyes looked into his steadily, and he felt rush over him a sudden shame. If she was seeking and expecting, it was to him more than ever that she was now looking for protection. The haunting trouble in her eyes, their entreaty, their shining faith in him told him that, and he was glad that she had not seen his sudden fear and suspicion. She clung more closely to him as they followed Blackton. Her little fingers held his arm as if she were afraid some force might tear him from her. He saw that she was looking quickly at the faces about them with that same questing mystery in her search.

At the thin outer edge of the crowd Blackton dropped back beside them. A few steps more and they came to the end of the platform, where a buckboard was waiting in the dim light of one of the station lamps. Blackton introduced Joanne, and assisted her into the seat beside his wife.

"We'll leave you ladies to become acquainted while we rustle the baggage," he said. "Got the checks, Aldous?"

Joanne had given Aldous two checks on the train, and he handed them to Blackton. Together they made their way to the baggage-room.

"Thought Miss Gray would have some luggage, so I had one of my men come with another team," he explained. "We won't have to wait. I'll give him the checks."

Before they returned to the buckboard, Aldous halted his friend.

"I couldn't say much in that telegram," he said. "If

Miss Gray wasn't a bit tired and unstrung I'd let her explain. I want you to tell Mrs. Blackton that she has come to Tête Jaune on a rather unpleasant mission, old man. Nothing less than to attend to the grave of a—a near relative."

"I regret that—I regret it very much," replied Blackton, flinging away the match he had lighted without touching it to his cigar. "I guessed something was wrong. She's welcome at our place, Aldous—for as long as she remains in Tête Jaune. Perhaps I knew this relative. If I can assist you—or her——"

"He died before the steel came," said Aldous. "Fitz-Hugh was his name. Old Donald and I are going to take her to the grave. Miss Gray is an old friend of mine," he lied boldly. "We want to start at dawn. Will that be too much trouble for you and your wife?"

"No trouble at all," declared Blackton. "We've got a Chinese cook who's more like an owl than a human. How will a four o'clock breakfast suit you?"

"Splendidly!"

As they went on, the contractor said:

"I carried your word to MacDonald. Hunted him down out in the bush. He is very anxious to see you. He said he would not be at the depot, but that you must not fail him. He's kept strangely under cover of late. Curious old ghost, isn't he?"

"The strangest man in the mountains," said Aldous "And, when you come to know him, the most lovable. We're going North together."

This time it was Blackton who stopped, with a hand on his companion's arm. A short distance from them they

could see the buckboard in the light of the station lamp.

"Has old Donald written you lately?" he asked.

"No. He says he hasn't written a letter in twenty years."

Blackton hesitated.

"Then you haven't heard of his—accident?"

The strange look in the contractor's face as he lighted a cigar made John Aldous catch him sharply by the arm.

"What do you mean?"

"He was shot. I happened to be in Dr. Brady's office when he dragged himself in, late at night. Doc got the bullet out of his shoulder. It wasn't a bad wound. The old man swore it was an accident, and asked us to say nothing about it. We haven't. But I've been wondering. Old Donald said he was careless with his own pistol. But the fact is, Aldous—*he was shot from behind!*"

"The deuce you say!"

"There was no perforation except from *behind.* In some way the bullet had spent itself before it reached him. Otherwise it would have killed him."

For a moment Aldous stared in speechless amazement into Blackton's face.

"When did this happen?" he asked then.

"Three days ago. Since then I have not seen old Donald until to-night. Almost by accident I met him out there in the timber. I delivered the telegram you sent him. After he had read it I showed him mine. He scribbled something on a bit of paper, folded it, and pinned it with a porcupine quill. I've been mighty curious, but I haven't pulled out that quill. Here it is."

From his pocket he produced the note and gave it to Aldous.

"I'll read it a little later," said Aldous. "The ladies may possibly become anxious about us."

He dropped it in his pocket as he thanked Blackton for the trouble he had taken in finding MacDonald. As he climbed into the front seat of the buckboard his eyes met Joanne's. He was glad that in a large measure she had recovered her self-possession. She smiled at him as they drove off, and there was something in the sweet tremble of her lips that made him almost fancy she was asking his forgiveness for having forgotten herself. Her voice sounded more natural to him as she spoke to Mrs. Blackton. The latter, a plump little blue-eyed woman with dimples and golden hair, was already making her feel at home. She leaned over and placed a hand on her husband's shoulder.

"Let's drive home by way of town, Paul," she suggested. "It's only a little farther, and I'm quite sure Miss Gray will be interested in our Great White Way of the mountains. And I'm crazy to see that bear you were telling me about," she added.

Nothing could have suited Aldous more than this suggestion. He was sure that Quade, following his own and Culver Rann's old methods, had already prepared stories about Joanne, and he not only wanted Quade's friends—but all of Tête Jaune as well—to see Joanne in the company of Mrs. Paul Blackton and her husband. And this was a splendid opportunity, for the night carnival was already beginning.

"The bear is worth seeing," said Blackton, turning his

team in the direction of the blazing light of the half-mile street that was the Broadway of Tête Jaune. "And the woman who rides him is worth seeing, too," he chuckled. "He's a big fellow—and she plays the Godiva act. Rides him up and down the street with her hair down, collecting dimes and quarters and half dollars as she goes."

A minute later the length of the street swept out ahead of them. It is probable that the world had never before seen a street just like this Broadway in Tête Jaune—the pleasure Mecca of five thousand workers along the line of steel. There had been great "camps" in the building of other railroads, but never a city in the wilderness like this—a place that had sprung up like magic and which, a few months later, was doomed to disappear as quickly. For half a mile it blazed out ahead of them, two garishly lighted rows of shacks, big tents, log buildings, and rough board structures, with a rough, wide street between.

To-night Tête Jaune was like a blazing fire against the darkness of the forest and mountain beyond. A hundred sputtering "jacks" sent up columns of yellow flame in front of places already filled with the riot and tumult of the night. A thousand lamps and coloured lanterns flashed like fireflies along the way, and under them the crowd had gathered, and was flowing back and forth. It was a weird and fantastic sight—this one strange and almost uncanny street that was there largely for the play and the excitement of men.

Aldous turned to Joanne. He knew what this town meant. It was the first and the last of its kind, and its history would never be written. The world outside the mountains knew nothing of it. Like the men who made

up its transient life it would soon be a forgotten thing of the past. Even the mountains would forget it. But more than once, as he had stood a part of it, his blood had warmed at the thought of the things it held secret, the things that would die with it, the big human drama it stood for, its hidden tragedies, its savage romance, its passing comedy. He found something of his own thought in Joanne's eyes.

"There isn't much to it," he said, "but to-night, if you made the hunt, you could find men of eighteen or twenty nationalities in that street."

"And a little more besides," laughed Blackton. "If you could write the complete story of how Tête Jaune has broken the law, Aldous, it would fill a volume as big as Peggy's family Bible!"

"And after all, it's funny," said Peggy Blackton. "There!" she cried suddenly. "Isn't *that* funny?"

The glare and noisy life were on both sides of them now. Half a dozen phonographs were going. From up the street came the softer strains of a piano, and from in between the shrieking notes of bagpipe. Peggy Blackton was pointing to a brilliantly lighted, black-tarpaulined shop. Huge white letters on its front announced that Lady Barbers were within. They could see two of them at work through the big window. And they were pretty. The place was crowded with men. Men were waiting outside.

"Paul says they charge a dollar for a haircut and fifty cents for a shave," explained Peggy Blackton. "And the man over there across the street is going broke because he can't get business at fifteen cents a shave. *Isn't* it funny?"

As they went on Aldous searched the street for Quade. Several times he turned to the back seat, and always he found Joanne's eyes questing in that strange way for the some one whom she expected to see. Mrs. Blackton was pointing out lighted places, and explaining things as they passed, but he knew that in spite of her apparent attention Joanne heard only a part of what she was saying. In that crowd she hoped—or feared—to find a certain face. And again Aldous told himself that it was not Quade's face.

Near the end of the street a crowd was gathering, and here, for a moment, Blackton stopped his team within fifty feet of the objects of attraction. A slim, exquisitely formed woman in shimmering silk was standing beside a huge brown bear. Her sleek black hair, shining as if it had been oiled, fell in curls about her shoulders. Her rouged lips were smiling. Even at that distance her black eyes sparkled like diamonds. She had evidently just finished taking up a collection, for she was fastening the cord of a silken purse about her neck. In another moment she bestrode the bear, the crowd fell apart, and as the onlookers broke into a roar of applause the big beast lumbered slowly up the street with its rider.

"One of Culver Rann's friends," said Blackton *sotto voce*, as he drove on. "She takes in a hundred a night if she makes a cent!"

Blackton's big log bungalow was close to the engineers' camp half a mile distant from the one lighted street and the hundreds of tents and shacks that made up the residential part of the town. Not until they were inside, and Peggy Blackton had disappeared with Joanne for a few moments, did Aldous take old Donald MacDonald's note

from his pocket. He pulled out the quill, unfolded the bit of paper, and read the few crudely written words the mountain man had sent him. Blackton turned in time to catch the sudden amazement in his face. Crushing the note in his hand, Aldous looked at the other, his mouth tightening.

"You must help me make excuses, old man," he said quietly. "It will seem strange to them if I do not stay for supper. But—it is impossible. I must see old Donald as quickly as I can get to him."

His manner more than his words kept Blackton from urging him to remain. The contractor stared at him for a moment, his own eyes growing harder and more direct.

"It's about the shooting," he said. "If you want me to go with you, Aldous——"

"Thanks. That will be unnecessary."

Peggy Blackton and Joanne were returning. Aldous turned toward them as they entered the room. With the note still in his hand he repeated to them what he had told Blackton—that he had received word which made it immediately urgent for him to go to MacDonald. He shook hands with the Blacktons, promising to be on hand for the four o'clock breakfast.

Joanne followed him to the door and out upon the veranda. For a moment they were alone, and now her eyes were wide and filled with fear as he clasped her hands closely in his own.

"I saw him," she whispered, her fingers tightening convulsively. "I saw that man—Quade—at the station. He followed us up the street. Twice I looked behind—and saw him. I am afraid—afraid to let you go back there. I

A slim, exquisitely formed woman in shimmering silk was standing beside a huge brown bear. In another moment she bestrode the bear, and the big beast lumbered up the street with its rider.

believe he is somewhere out there now—waiting for you!"

She was frightened, trembling; and her fear for him, the fear in her shining eyes, in her throbbing breath, in the clasp of her fingers, sent through John Aldous a joy that almost made him free her hands and crush her in his arms in the ecstasy of that wonderful moment. Then Peggy Blackton and her husband appeared in the door. He released her hands, and stepped out into the gloom. The cheery good-nights of the Blacktons followed him. And Joanne's good-night was in her eyes—following him until he was gone, filled with their entreaty and their fear.

A hundred yards distant, where the trail split to lead to the camp of the engineers, there was a lantern on a pole. Here Aldous paused, out of sight of the Blackton bungalow, and in the dim light read again MacDonald's note.

In a cramped and almost illegible hand the old wanderer of the mountains had written:

> Don't go to cabin. Culver Rann waiting to kill you. Don't show yorself in town. Cum to me as soon as you can on trail striking north to Loon Lake. Watch yorself. Be ready with yor gun.
>
> DONALD MACDONALD.

Aldous shoved the note in his pocket and slipped back out of the lantern-glow into deep shadow. For several minutes he stood silent and listening.

CHAPTER XI

AS JOHN ALDOUS stood hidden in the darkness, listening for the sound of a footstep, Joanne's words still rang in his ears. "I believe he is out there—waiting for you," she had said; and, chuckling softly in the gloom, he told himself that nothing would give him more satisfaction than an immediate and material proof of her fear. In the present moment he felt a keen desire to confront Quade face to face out there in the lantern-glow, and settle with the mottled beast once for all. The fact that Quade had seen Joanne as the guest of the Blacktons hardened him in his determination. Quade could no longer be in possible error regarding her. He knew that she had friends, and that she was not of the kind who could be made or induced to play his game and Culver Rann's. If he followed her after this——

Aldous gritted his teeth and stared up and down the black trail. Five minutes passed and he heard nothing that sounded like a footstep, and he saw no moving shadow in the gloom. Slowly he continued along the road until he came to where a narrow pack-trail swung north and east through the thick spruce and balsam in the direction of Loon Lake. Remembering MacDonald's warning, he kept his pistol in his hand. The moon was just beginning to rise over the shoulder of a mountain, and after a little it lighted up the more open spaces ahead

of him. Now and then he paused, and turned to listen. As he progressed with slowness and caution, his mind worked swiftly. He knew that Donald MacDonald was the last man in the world to write such a message as he had sent him through Blackton unless there had been a tremendous reason for it. But why, he asked himself again and again, should Culver Rann want to kill him? Rann knew nothing of Joanne. He had not seen her. And surely Quade had not had time to formulate a plot with his partner before MacDonald wrote his warning. Besides, an attempt had been made to assassinate the old mountaineer! MacDonald had not warned him against Quade. He had told him to guard himself against Rann. And what reason could this Culver Rann have for doing him injury? The more he thought of it the more puzzled he became. And then, in a flash, the possible solution of it all came to him.

Had Culver Rann discovered the secret mission on which he and the old mountaineer were going into the North? Had he learned of the gold—where it was to be found? And was their assassination the first step in a plot to secure possession of the treasure?

The blood in Aldous' veins ran faster. He gripped his pistol harder. More closely he looked into the moonlit gloom of the trail ahead of him. He believed that he had guessed the meaning of MacDonald's warning. It was the gold! More than once thought of the yellow treasure far up in the North had thrilled him, but never as it thrilled him now. Was the old tragedy of it to be lived over again? Was it again to play its part in a terrible drama of men's lives, as it had played it more than forty years ago? The

gold! The gold that for nearly half a century had lain with the bones of its dead, alone with its terrible secret, alone until Donald MacDonald had found it again! He had not told Joanne the story of it, the appalling and almost unbelievable tragedy of it. He had meant to do so. But they had talked of other things. He had meant to tell her that it was not the gold itself that was luring him far to the north—that it was not the gold alone that was taking Donald MacDonald back to it.

And now, as he stood for a moment listening to the low sweep of the wind in the spruce-tops, it seemed to him that the night was filled with whispering voices of that long-ago—and he shivered, and held his breath. A cloud had drifted under the moon. For a few moments it was pitch dark. The fingers of his hand dug into the rough bark of a spruce. He did not move. It was then that he heard something above the caressing rustle of the wind in the spruce-tops.

It came to him faintly, from full half a mile deeper in the black forest that reached down to the bank of the Frazer. It was the night call of an owl—one of the big gray owls that turned white as the snow in winter. Mentally he counted the notes in the call. One, two, three, *four*—and a flood of relief swept over him. It was MacDonald. They had used that signal in their hunting, when they had wished to locate each other without frightening game. Always there were three notes in the big gray owl's quavering cry. The fourth was human. He put his hands to his mouth and sent back an answer, emphasizing the fourth note. The light breeze had died down for a moment, and Aldous heard the old moun-

taineer's reply as it floated faintly back to him through the forest. Continuing to hold his pistol, he went on, this time more swiftly.

MacDonald did not signal again. The moon was climbing rapidly into the sky, and with each passing minute the night was becoming lighter. He had gone half a mile when he stopped again and signalled softly. MacDonald's voice answered, so near that for an instant the automatic flashed in the moonlight. Aldous stepped out where the trail had widened into a small open spot. Half a dozen paces from him, in the bright flood of the moon, stood Donald MacDonald.

The night, the moon-glow, the tense attitude of his waiting added to the weirdness of the picture which the old wanderer of the mountains made as Aldous faced him. MacDonald was tall; some trick of the night made him appear almost unhumanly tall as he stood in the centre of that tiny moonlit amphitheatre. His head was bowed a little, and his shoulders drooped a little, for he was old. A thick, shaggy beard fell in a silvery sheen over his breast. His hair, gray as the underwing of the owl whose note he forged, straggled in uncut disarray from under the drooping rim of a battered and weatherworn hat. His coat was of buckskin, and it was short at the sleeves—four inches too short; and the legs of his trousers were cut off between the knees and the ankles, giving him a still greater appearance of height.

In the crook of his arm MacDonald held a rifle, a strange-looking, long-barrelled rifle of a type a quarter of a century old. And Donald MacDonald, in the picture he made, was like his gun, old and gray and ghostly, as if he

had risen out of some graveyard of the past to warm himself in the yellow splendour of the moon. But in the grayness and gauntness of him there was something that was mightier than the strength of youth. He was alert. In the crook of his arm there was caution. His eyes were as keen as the eyes of an animal. His shoulders spoke of a strength but little impaired by the years. Ghostly gray beard, ghostly gray hair, haunting eyes that gleamed, all added to the strange and weird impressiveness of the man as he stood before Aldous. And when he spoke, his voice had in it the deep, low, cavernous note of a partridge's drumming.

"I'm glad you've come, Aldous," he said. "I've been waiting ever since the train come in. I was afraid you'd go to the cabin!"

Aldous stepped forth and gripped the old mountaineer's outstretched hand. There was intense relief in Donald's eyes.

"I got a little camp back here in the bush," he went on, nodding riverward. "It's safer 'n the shack these days. Yo're sure—there ain't no one following?"

"Quite certain," assured Aldous. "Look here, MacDonald—what in thunder has happened? Don't continue my suspense! Who shot you? Why did you warn me?"

Deep in his beard the old hunter laughed.

"Same fellow as would have shot you, I guess," he answered. "They made a bad job of it, Johnny, an awful bad job, an' mebby there'd been a better man layin' for you!"

He was pulling Aldous in the bush as he spoke. For ten minutes he dived on ahead through a jungle in which

there was no trail. Suddenly he turned, led the way around the edge of a huge mass of rock, and paused a moment later before a small smouldering fire. Against the face of a gigantic boulder was a balsam shelter. A few cooking utensils were scattered about. It was evident that MacDonald had been living here for several days.

"Looks as though I'd run away, don't it, Johnny?" he asked, laughing in his curious, chuckling way again. "An' so I did, boy. From the mountain up there I've been watching things through my telescope—been keepin' quiet since Doc pulled the bullet out. I've been layin' for the Breed. I wanted him to think I'd vamoosed. I'm goin' to kill him!"

He had squatted down before the fire, his long rifle across his knees, and spoke as quietly as though he was talking of a partridge or a squirrel instead of a human being. He wormed a hand into one of his pockets and produced a small dark object which he handed to Aldous. The other felt an uncanny chill as it touched his fingers. It was a mis-shapened bullet.

"Doc gave me the lead," continued MacDonald coolly, beginning to slice a pipeful of tobacco from a tar-black plug. "It come from Joe's gun. I've hunted with him enough to know his bullet. He fired through the window of the cabin. If it hadn't been for the broom handle—just the end of it stickin' up"—he shrugged his gaunt shoulders as he stuffed the tobacco into the bowl of his pipe—"I'd been dead!" he finished tersely.

"You mean that Joe——"

"Has sold himself to Culver Rann!" exclaimed MacDonald. He sprang to his feet. For the first time he

showed excitement. His eyes blazed with repressed rage. A hand gripped the barrel of his rifle as if to crush it. "He's sold himself to Culver Rann!" he repeated. "He's sold him our secret. He's told him where the gold is, Johnny! He's bargained to guide Rann an' his crowd to it! An' first—they're goin' to kill *us!*"

With a low whistle Aldous took off his hat. He ran a hand through his blond-gray hair. Then he replaced his hat and drew two cigars from his pocket. MacDonald accepted one. Aldous' eyes were glittering; his lips were smiling.

"They are, are they, Donald? They're going to kill us?"

"They're goin' to try," amended the old hunter, with another curious chuckle in his ghostly beard. "They're goin' to try, Johnny. That's why I told you not to go to the cabin. I wasn't expecting you for a week. Tomorrow I was goin' to start on a hike for Miette. I been watching through my telescope from the mountain up there. I see Quade come in this morning on a hand-car. Twice I see him and Rann together. Then I saw Blackton hike out into the bush. I was worrying about you, an' wondered if he had any word. So I laid for him on the trail—an' I guess it was lucky. I ain't been able to set my eyes on Joe. I looked for hours through the telescope—an' I couldn't find him. He's gone, or Culver Rann is keeping him out of sight."

For several moments Aldous looked at his companion in silence. Then he said:

"You're sure of all this, are you, Donald? You have good proof—that Joe has turned traitor?"

"I've been suspicious of him ever since we come down

from the North," spoke MacDonald slowly. "I watched him—night an' day. I was afraid he'd get a grubstake an' start back alone. Then I saw him with Culver Rann. It was late. I heard 'im leave the shack, an' I followed. He went to Rann's house—an' Rann was expecting him. Three times I followed him to Culver Rann's house. I knew what was happening then, an' I planned to get him back in the mountains on a hunt, an' kill him. But I was too late. The shot came through the window. Then he disappeared. An'—Culver Rann is getting an outfit together! Twenty head of horses, with grub for three months!"

"The deuce! And our outfit? Is it ready?"

"To the last can o' beans!"

"And your plan, Donald?"

All at once the old mountaineer's eyes were aflame with eagerness as he came nearer to Aldous.

"Get out of Tête Jaune to-night!" he cried in a low, hissing voice that quivered with excitement. "Hit the trail before dawn! Strike into the mountains with our outfit—far enough back—and then wait!"

"Wait?"

"Yes—wait. If they follow us—*fight!*"

Slowly Aldous held out a hand. The old mountaineer's met it. Steadily they looked into each other's eyes.

Then John Aldous spoke:

"If this had been two days ago I would have said yes. But to-night—it is impossible."

The fingers that had tightened about his own relaxed. Slowly a droop came into MacDonald's shoulders. Disappointment, a look that was almost despair settled in his

eyes. Seeing the change, Aldous held the old hunter's hand more firmly.

"That doesn't mean we're not going to fight," he said quickly. "Only we've got to plan differently. Sit down, Donald. Something has been happening to me. And I'm going to tell you about it."

A little back from the fire they seated themselves, and Aldous told Donald MacDonald about Joanne.

He began at the beginning, from the moment his eyes first saw her as she entered Quade's place. He left nothing out. He told how she had come into his life, and how he intended to fight to keep her from going out of it. He told of his fears, his hopes, the mystery of their coming to Tête Jaune, and how Quade had preceded them to plot the destruction of the woman he loved. He described her as she had stood that morning, like a radiant goddess in the sun; and when he came to that he leaned nearer, and said softly:

"And when I saw her there, Donald, with her hair streaming about her like that, I thought of the time you told me of that other woman—the woman of years and years ago—and how you, Donald, used to look upon her in the sun, and rejoice in your possession. Her spirit has been with you always. You have told me how for nearly fifty years you have followed it over these mountains. And this woman means as much to me. If she should die to-night her spirit would live with me in that same way. You understand, Donald. I can't go into the mountains to-night. God knows when I can go—now. But you——"

MacDonald had risen. He turned his face to the black

wall of the forest. Aldous thought he saw a sudden quiver pass through the great, bent shoulders.

"And I," said MacDonald slowly, "will have the horses ready for you at dawn. We will fight this other fight—later."

CHAPTER XII

FOR an hour after Donald MacDonald had pledged himself to accompany Joanne and Aldous on their pilgrimage to the grave in the Saw Tooth Range the two men continued to discuss the unusual complications in which they had suddenly become involved, and at the same time prepared themselves a supper of bacon and coffee over the fire. They agreed upon a plan of action with one exception. Aldous was determined to return to the town, arguing there was a good strategic reason for showing himself openly and without fear. MacDonald opposed this apprehensively.

"Better lay quiet until morning," he expostulated. "You'd better listen to me, an' do that, Johnny. I've got something in my shoulder that tells me you'd better!"

In the face of the old hunter's misgiving, Aldous prepared to leave. It was nearly ten o'clock when he set back in the direction of Tête Jaune, Donald accompanying him as far as the moonlit amphitheatre in the forest. There they separated, and Aldous went on alone.

He believed that Joanne and the Blacktons would half expect him to return to the bungalow after he had seen MacDonald. He was sure that Blackton, at least, would look for him until quite late. The temptation to take advantage of their hospitality was great, especially as it

would bring him in the company of Joanne again. On the other hand, he was certain that this first night in Tête Jaune held very large possibilities for him. The detective instinct in him was roused, and his adventurous spirit was alive for action. First of all, he wanted proof of what MacDonald had told him. That an attempt had been made to assassinate the old mountaineer he did not for an instant doubt. But had Joe DeBar, the half-breed, actually betrayed them? Had he sold himself to Culver Rann, and did Rann hold the key to the secret expedition they had planned into the North? He did not, at first, care to see Rann. He made up his mind that if he did meet him he would stop and chat casually with him, as though he had heard and seen nothing to rouse his suspicions. He particularly wanted to find DeBar; and, next to DeBar, Quade himself.

The night carnival was at its height when Aldous reentered the long, lighted street. From ten until eleven was the liveliest hour of the night. Even the restaurants and soup-kitchens were crowded then. He strolled slowly down the street until he came to a little crowd gathered about the bear equestrienne. The big canvas dance-hall a few doors away had lured from her most of her admirers by this time, and Aldous found no difficulty in reaching the inner circle. He looked first for the half-breed. Failing to find him, he looked at the woman, who stood only a few feet from him. Her glossy black curls were a bit dishevelled, and the excitement of the night had added to the vivid colouring of her rouged lips and cheeks. Her body was sleek and sinuous in its silken vesture; arms and shoulders were startlingly white; and when she turned, fac-

ing Aldous, her black eyes flashed fires of deviltry and allurement.

For a moment he stared into her face. If he had not been looking closely he would not have caught the swift change that shot into the siren-like play of her orbs. It was almost instantaneous. Her slow-travelling glance stopped as she saw him. He saw the quick intake of her breath, a sudden compression of her lips, the startled, searching scrutiny of a pair of eyes from which, for a moment, all the languor and coquetry of her trade were gone. Then she passed him, smiling again, nodding, sweeping a hand and arm effectively through her handsome curls as she flung a shapely limb over the broad back of the bear. In a garish sort of way the woman was beautiful, and this night, as on all others, her beauty had nearly filled the silken coin-bag suspended from her neck. As she rode down the street Aldous recalled Blackton's words: She was a friend of Culver Rann's. He wondered if this fact accounted for the strangeness of the look she had given him.

He passed on to the dance-hall. It was crowded, mostly with men. But here and there, like so many faces peering forth from living graves, he saw the Little Sisters of Tête Jaune Cache. Outnumbered ten to one, their voices rang out in shrill banter and delirious laughter above the rumble of men. At the far end, a fiddle, a piano, and a clarinet were squealing forth music. The place smelled strongly of whisky. It always smelled of that, for most of the men who sought amusement here got their whisky in spite of the law. There were rock-hogs from up the line, and rock-hogs from down the line, men of all

nationalities and of almost all ages; teamsters, trail-cutters, packers, and rough-shod navvies; men whose daily task was to play with dynamite and giant powder; steel-men, tie-men, and men who drilled into the hearts of mountains. More than once John Aldous had looked upon this same scene, and had listened to the trample and roar and wild revelry of it, marvelling that to-morrow the men of this saturnalia would again be the builders of an empire. The thin, hollow-cheeked faces that passed and repassed him, rouged and smiling, could not destroy in his mind the strength of the picture. They were but moths, fluttering about in their own doom, contending with each other to see which should quickest achieve destruction.

For several minutes Aldous scanned the faces in the big tent-hall, and nowhere did he see DeBar. He dropped out, and continued leisurely along the lighted way until he came to Lovak's huge black-and-white striped soup-tent. At ten o'clock, and until twelve, this was as crowded as the dance-hall. Aldous knew Lovak, the Hungarian.

Through Lovak he had found the key that had unlocked for him many curious and interesting things associated with that powerful Left Arm of the Empire Builders—the Slav. Except for a sprinkling of Germans, a few Italians, and now and then a Greek or Swiss, only the Slavs filled Lovak's place—Slavs from all the Russias and the nations south: the quick and chattering Polak; the thick-set, heavy-jowled Croatian; the silent and dangerous-eyed Lithuanian. All came in for Lovak's wonderful soup, which he sold in big yellow bowls at ten cents a bowl—soup of barley, rice, and cabbage, of beef and mutton, of every-

thing procurable out of which soup could be made, and, whether of meat or vegetable, smelling to heaven of garlic.

Fifty men were eating when Aldous went in, devouring their soup with the utter abandon and joy of the Galician, so that the noise they made was like the noise of fifty pigs at fifty troughs. Now and then DeBar, the half-breed, came here for soup, and Aldous searched quickly for him. He was turning to go when his friend, Lovak, came to him. No, Lovak had not seen DeBar. But he had news. That day the authorities—the police—had confiscated twenty dressed hogs, and in each porcine carcass they had found four-quart bottles of whisky, artistically imbedded in the leaf-lard fat. The day before those same authorities had confiscated a barrel of "kerosene." They were becoming altogether too officious, Lovak thought.

Aldous went on. He looked in at a dozen restaurants, and twice as many soft-drink emporiums, where phonographs were worked until they were cracked and dizzy. He stopped at a small tobacco shop, and entered to buy himself some cigars. There was one other customer ahead of him. He was lighting a cigar, and the light of a big hanging lamp flashed on a diamond ring. Over his sputtering match his eyes met those of John Aldous. They were dark eyes, neither brown nor black, but dark, with the keenness and strange glitter of a serpent's. He wore a small, clipped moustache; his hands were white; he was a man whom one might expect to possess the *sang froid* of a devil in any emergency. For barely an instant he hesitated in the operation of lighting his cigar as he saw Aldous. Then he nodded.

"Hello, John Aldous," he said.

"Good evening, Culver Rann," replied Aldous.

For a moment his nerves had tingled—the next they were like steel. Culver Rann's teeth gleamed. Aldous smiled back. They were cold, hard, rapierlike glances. Each understood now that the other was a deadly enemy, for Quade's enemies were also Culver Rann's. Aldous moved carelessly to the glass case in which were the cigars. With the barest touch of one of his slim white hands Culver Rann stopped him.

"Have one of mine, Aldous," he invited, opening a silver case filled with cigars. "We've never had the pleasure of smoking together, you know."

"Never," said Aldous, accepting one of the cigars. "Thanks."

As he lighted it, their eyes met again. Aldous turned to the case.

"Half a dozen 'Noblemen,'" he said to the man behind the counter; then, to Rann: "Will you have one on me?"

"With pleasure," said Rann. He added, smiling straight into the other's eyes, "What are you doing up here, Aldous? After local colour?"

"Perhaps. The place interests me."

"It's a lively town."

"Decidedly. And I understand that you've played an important part in the making of it," replied Aldous carelessly.

For a flash Rann's eyes darkened, and his mouth hardened, then his white teeth gleamed again. He had caught the insinuation, and he had scarcely been able to ward off the shot.

"I've tried to do my small share," he admitted. "If you're after local colour for your books, Aldous, I possibly may be able to assist you—if you're in town long."

"Undoubtedly you could," said Aldous. "I think you could tell me a great deal that I would like to know, Rann. But—will you?"

There was a direct challenge in his coldly smiling eyes.

"Yes, I think I shall be quite pleased to do so," said Rann. "Especially—if you are long in town." There was an odd emphasis on those last words.

He moved toward the door.

"And if you are here very long," he added, his eyes gleaming significantly, "it is possible you may have experiences of your own which would make very interesting reading if they ever got into print. Good-night, Aldous!"

For two or three minutes after Rann had gone Aldous loitered in the tobacco shop. Then he went out. All at once it struck him that he should have kept his eyes on Quade's partner. He should have followed him. With the hope of seeing him again he walked up and down the street. It was eleven o'clock when he went into Big Ben's pool-room. Five minutes later he came out just as a woman hurried past him, carrying with her a strong scent of perfume. It was the Lady of the Bear. She was in a street dress now, her glossy curls still falling loose about her—probably homeward bound after her night's harvest. It struck Aldous that the hour was early for her retirement, and that she seemed somewhat in a hurry.

The woman was going in the direction of Rann's big log bungalow, which was built well out of town toward the river. She had not seen him as he stood in the pool-room

doorway, and before she had passed out of sight he was following her. There were a dozen branch trails and "streets" on the way to Rann's, and into the gloom of some one of these the woman disappeared, so that Aldous lost her entirely. He was not disappointed when he found she had left the main trail.

Five minutes later he stood close to Rann's house. From the side on which he had approached it was dark. No gleam of light showed through the windows. Slowly he walked around the building, and stopped suddenly on the opposite side. Here a closely drawn curtain was illuminated by a glow from within. Cautiously Aldous made his way along the log wall of the house until he came to the window. At one side the curtain had caught against some object, leaving perhaps a quarter of an inch of space through which the light shone. Aldous brought his eyes on a level with this space.

A half of the room came within his vision. Directly in front of him, lighted by a curiously shaped iron lamp suspended from the ceiling, was a dull red mahogany desk-table. At one side of this, partly facing him, was Culver Rann. Opposite him sat Quade.

Rann was speaking, while Quade, with his bullish shoulders hunched forward and his fleshy red neck rolling over the collar of his coat, leaned across the table in a tense and listening attitude. With his eyes glued to the aperture, Aldous strained his ears to catch what Rann was saying. He heard only the low and unintelligible monotone of his voice. A mocking smile was accompanying Rann's words. To-night, as at all times, this hawk who preyed upon human lives was immaculate. In all ways

but one he was the antithesis of the beefy scoundrel who sat opposite him. On the hand that toyed carelessly with the fob of his watch flashed a diamond; another sparkled in his cravat. His dark hair was sleek and well brushed; his bristly little moustache was clipped in the latest fashion. He was not large. His hands, as he made a gesture toward Quade, were of womanish whiteness. Casually, on the street or in a Pullman, Aldous would have taken him for a gentleman. Now, as he stared through the narrow slit between the bottom of the curtain and the sill, he knew that he was looking upon one of the most dangerous men in all the West. Quade was a villain. Culver Rann, quiet and cool and suave, was a devil. Behind his depravity worked the brain which Quade lacked, and a nerve which, in spite of that almost effeminate immaculateness, had been described to Aldous as colossal.

Suddenly Quade turned, and Aldous saw that he was flushed and excited. He struck the desk a blow with his fist. Culver Rann leaned back and smiled. And John Aldous slipped away from the window.

His nerves were quivering; in the darkness he unbuttoned the pocket that held his automatic. Through the window he had seen an open door behind Rann, and his blood thrilled with the idea that had come to him. He was sure the two partners in crime were discussing himself and MacDonald—and Joanne. To hear what they were saying, to discover their plot, would be three quarters of the fight won, if it came to a fight. The open door was an inspiration.

Swiftly and silently he went to the rear of the house. He tried the door and found it unlocked. Softly he

opened it, swinging it inward an inch at a time, and scarcely breathing as he entered. It was dark, and there was a second closed door ahead of him. From beyond that he heard voices. He closed the outer door so that he would not be betrayed by a current of air or a sound from out of the night. Then, even more cautiously and slowly, he began to open the second door.

An inch at first, then two inches, three inches—a foot—he worked the door inward. There was no light in this second room, and he lay close to the floor, head and shoulders thrust well in. Through the third and open door he saw Quade and Culver Rann. Rann was laughing softly as he lighted a fresh cigar. His voice was quiet and good humoured, but filled with a banter which it was evident Quade was not appreciating.

"You amaze me," Rann was saying. "You amaze me utterly. You've gone mad—mad as a rock-rabbit, Quade! Do you mean to tell me you're on the square when you offer to turn over a half of your share in the gold if I help you to get this woman?"

"I do," replied Quade thickly. "I mean just that! And we'll put it down in black an' white—here, now. You fix the papers, same as any other deal, and I'll sign!"

For a moment Culver Rann did not reply. He leaned back in his chair, thrust the thumbs of his white hands in his vest, and sent a cloud of smoke above his head. Then he looked at Quade, a gleam of humour in his eyes.

"Nothing like a woman for turning a man's head soft," he chuckled. "Nothing in the world like it, 'pon my word, Quade. First it was DeBar. I don't believe we'd got him if he hadn't seen Marie riding her bear. Marie

and her curls and her silk tights, Quade—s'elp me, it wouldn't have surprised me so much if you'd fallen in love with *her!* And over this other woman you're as mad as Joe is over Marie. At first sight he was ready to sell his soul for her. So—I gave Marie to him. And now, for some other woman, you're just as anxious to surrender a half of your share of what we've bought through Marie. Good heaven, man, if you were in love with Marie——"

"Damn Marie!" growled Quade. "I know the time when you were bugs over her yourself, Rann. It wasn't so long ago. If I'd looked at her then——"

"Of course, not then," interrupted Rann smilingly. "That would have been impolite, Quade, and not at all in agreement with the spirit of our brotherly partnership. And, you must admit, Marie is a devilish good-looking girl. I've surrendered her only for a brief spell to DeBar After he has taken us to the gold—why, the poor idiot will probably have been sufficiently happy to——"

He paused, with a suggestive shrug of his shoulders.

"—go into cold storage," finished Quade.

"Exactly."

Again Quade leaned over the table, and for a moment there was silence, a silence in which Aldous thought the pounding of his heart must betray him. He lay motionless on the floor. The nails of his fingers dug into the bare wood. Under the palm of his right hand lay his automatic.

Then Quade spoke. There must have been more in his face than was spoken in his words, for Culver Rann took the cigar from between his lips, and a light that was deadly serious slowly filled his eyes.

"Rann, we'll talk business!" Quade's voice was harsh, deep, and quivering. "I want this woman. I may be a fool, but I'm going to have her. I might get her alone, but we've always done things together—an' so I made you that proposition. It ain't a hard job. It's one of the easiest jobs we ever had. Only that fool of a writer is in the way—an' he's got to go anyway. We've got to get rid of him on account of the gold, him an' MacDonald. We've got that planned. An' I've showed you how we can get the woman, an' no one ever know. Are you in on this with me?"

Culver Rann's reply was as quick and sharp as a pistol shot.

"I am."

For another moment there was silence. Then Quade asked:

"Any need of writin', Culver?"

"No. There can't be a written agreement in this deal because—it's dangerous. There won't be much said about old MacDonald. But questions, a good many of them, will be asked about this man Aldous. As for the woman——" Rann shrugged his shoulders with a sinister smile. "She will disappear like the others," he finished. "No one will ever get on to that. If she doesn't make a pal like Marie—after a time, why——"

Again Aldous saw that peculiar shrug of his shoulders.

Quade's head nodded on his thick neck.

"Of course, I agree to that," he said. "After a time. But most of 'em have come over, ain't they, Culver? Eh? Most of 'em have," he chuckled coarsely. "When you see her you won't call me a fool for going dippy over her,

Culver. And she'll come round all right after she's gone through what we've got planned for her. I'll make a pal of her!"

In that moment, as he listened to the gloating passion and triumph in Quade's brutal voice, something broke in the brain of John Aldous. It filled him with a fire that in an instant had devoured every thought or plan he had made, and in this madness he was consumed by a single desire—the desire to kill. And yet, as this conflagration surged through him, it did not blind or excite him. It did not make him leap forth in animal rage. It was something more terrible. He rose so quietly that the others did not see or hear him in the dark outer room. They did not hear the slight metallic click of the safety on his pistol.

For the space of a breath he stood and looked at them. He no longer sensed the words Quade was uttering. He was going in coolly and calmly to kill them. There was something disagreeable in the flashing thought that he might kill them from where he stood. He would not fire from the dark. He wanted to experience the exquisite sensation of that one first moment when they would writhe back from him, and see in him the presence of death. He would give them that one moment of life—just that one. Then he would kill.

With his pistol ready in his hand he stepped out into the lighted room.

"Good evening, gentlemen!" he said.

CHAPTER XIII

FOR a space of perhaps twenty seconds after John Aldous announced himself there was no visible sign of life on the part of either Quade or Culver Rann. The latter sat stunned. Not the movement of a finger broke the stonelike immobility of his attitude. His eyes were like two dark coals gazing steadily as a serpent's over Quade's hunched shoulders and bowed head. Quade seemed as if frozen on the point of speaking to Rann. One hand was still poised a foot above the table. It was he who broke the tense and lifeless tableau.

Slowly, almost as slowly as Aldous had opened the door, Quade turned his head, and stared into the coldly smiling face of the man whom he had plotted to kill, and saw the gleaming pistol in his hand. A curious look overcame his pouchy face, a look not altogether of terror—but of shock. He knew Aldous had heard. He accepted in an instant, and perceptibly, the significance of the pistol in his hand. But Culver Rann sat like a rock. His face expressed nothing. Not for the smallest part of a second had he betrayed any emotion that might be throbbing within him. In spite of himself Aldous admired the man's unflinching nerve.

"Good evening, gentlemen!" he repeated.

Then Rann leaned slowly forward over the table. One hand rose to his moustache. It was his right hand. The

other was invisible. Quade pulled himself together and stepped to the end of the table, his two empty hands in front of him. Aldous, still smiling, faced Rann's glittering eyes and covered him with his automatic. Culver Rann twisted the end of his moustache, and smiled back.

"Well?" he said. "Is it checkmate?"

"It is," replied Aldous. "I've promised you scoundrels one minute of life. I guess that minute is about up."

The last word was scarcely out of his mouth when the room was in darkness—a darkness so complete and sudden that for an instant his hand faltered, and in that instant he heard the overturning of a chair and the falling of a body. Twice his automatic sent a lightning-flash of fire where Culver Rann had sat; twice it spat threadlike ribbons of flame through the blackness where Quade had stood. He knew what had happened, and also what to expect if he lost out now. The curiously shaped iron lamp had concealed an electric bulb, and Rann had turned off the switch-key under the table. He had no further time to think. An object came hurtling through the thick gloom and fell with terrific force on his outstretched pistol arm. His automatic flew from his hand and struck against the wall. Unarmed, he sprang back toward the open door—full into the arms of Quade!

Aldous knew that it was Quade and not Culver Rann, and he struck out with all the force he could gather in a short-arm blow. His fist landed against Quade's thick neck. Again and again he struck, and Quade's grip loosened. In another moment he would have reached the door if Rann had not caught him from behind. Never had Aldous felt the clutch of hands like those of the womanish

hands of Culver Rann. It was as if sinuous fingers of steel were burying themselves in his flesh. Before they found his throat he flung himself backward with all his weight, and with a tremendous effort freed himself.

Both Quade and Culver Rann now stood between him and the door. He could hear Quade's deep, panting breath. Rann, as before, was silent as death. Then he heard the door close. A key clicked in the lock. He was trapped.

"Turn on the light, Billy," he heard Rann say in a quiet, unexcited voice. "We've got this house-breaker cornered, and he's lost his gun. Turn on the light—and I'll make one shot do the business!"

Aldous heard Quade moving, but he was not coming toward the table. Somewhere in the room was another switch connected with the iron lamp, and Aldous felt a curious chill shoot up his spine. Without seeing through that pitch darkness of the room he sensed the fact that Culver Rann was standing with his back against the locked door, a revolver in his hand. And he knew that Quade, feeling his way along the wall, held a revolver in his hand. Men like these two did not go unarmed. The instant the light was turned on they would do their work. As he stood, silent as Culver Rann, he realized the tables were turned. In that moment's madness roused by Quade's gloating assurance of possessing Joanne he had revealed himself like a fool, and now he was about to reap the whirlwind of his folly. Deliberately he had given himself up to his enemies. They, too, would be fools if they allowed him to escape alive.

He heard Quade stop. His thick hand was fumbling

along the wall. Aldous guessed that he was feeling for the switch. He almost fancied he could see Rann's revolver levelled at him through the darkness. In that thrilling moment his mind worked with the swiftness of a powder flash. One of his hands touched the edge of the desk-table, and he knew that he was standing directly opposite the curtained window, perhaps six feet from it. If he flung himself through the window the curtain would save him from being cut to pieces.

No sooner had the idea of escape come to him than he had acted. A flood of light filled the room as his body crashed through the glass. He heard a cry—a single shot—as he struck the ground. He gathered himself up and ran swiftly. Fifty yards away he stopped, and looked back. Quade and Rann were in the window. Then they disappeared, and a moment later the room was again in gloom.

For a second time Aldous hurried in the direction of MacDonald's camp. He knew that, in spite of the protecting curtain, the glass had cut him. He felt the warm blood dripping over his face; both hands were wet with it. The arm on which he had received the blow from the unseen object in the room gave him considerable pain, and he had slightly sprained an ankle in his leap through the window, so that he limped a little. But his mind was clear—so clear that in the face of his physical discomfort he caught himself laughing once or twice as he made his way along the trail.

Aldous was not of an ordinary type. To a curious and superlative degree he could appreciate a defeat as well as a triumph. His adventures had been a part of a life in which he had not always expected to win, and in to-night's

game he admitted that he had been hopelessly and ridiculously beaten. Tragedy, to him, was a first cousin of comedy; to-night he had set out to kill, and, instead of killing, he had run like a jack-rabbit for cover. Also, in that same half-hour Rann and Quade had been sure of him, and he had given them the surprise of their lives by his catapultic disappearance through the window. There was something ludicrous about it all—something that, to him, at least, had turned a possible tragedy into a very good comedy-drama.

Nor was Aldous blind to the fact that he had made an utter fool of himself, and that the consequences of his indiscretion might prove extremely serious. Had he listened to the conspirators without betraying himself he would have possessed an important advantage over them. The knowledge he had gained from overhearing their conversation would have made it comparatively easy for MacDonald and him to strike them a perhaps fatal blow through the half-breed DeBar. As the situation stood now, he figured that Quade and Culver Rann held the advantage. Whatever they had planned to do they would put into quick execution. They would not lose a minute.

It was not for himself that Aldous feared. Neither did he fear for Joanne. Every drop of red fighting blood in him was ready for further action, and he was determined that Quade should find no opportunity of accomplishing any scheme he might have against Joanne's person. On the other hand, unless they could head off DeBar, he believed that Culver Rann's chances of reaching the gold ahead of them would grow better with the passing of each hour. To protect Joanne from Quade he must lose no

time. MacDonald would be in the same predicament, while Rann, assisted by as many rascals of his own colour as he chose to take with him, would be free to carry out the other part of the conspirators' plans.

The longer he thought of the mess he had stirred up the more roundly Aldous cursed his imprudence. And this mess, as he viewed it in these cooler moments, was even less disturbing than the thought of what might have happened had he succeeded in his intention of killing both Quade and Rann. Twenty times as he made his way through the darkness toward MacDonald's camp he told himself that he must have been mad. To have killed Rann or Quade in self-defence, or in open fight, would have been playing the game with a shadow of mountain law behind it. But he had invaded Rann's home. Had he killed them he would have had but little more excuse than a house-breaker or a suspicious husband might have had. Tête Jaune would not countenance cold-blooded shooting, even of criminals. He should have taken old Donald's advice and waited until they were in the mountains. An unpleasant chill ran through him as he thought of the narrowness of his double escape.

To his surprise, John Aldous found MacDonald awake when he arrived at the camp in the thickly timbered coulee. He was preparing a midnight cup of coffee over a fire that was burning cheerfully between two big rocks. Purposely Aldous stepped out into the full illumination of it. The old hunter looked up. For a moment he stared into the blood-smeared face of his friend; then he sprang to his feet, and caught him by the arm.

"Yes, I got it," nodded Aldous cheerfully. "I went

out for it, Mac, and I got it! Get out your emergency kit, will you? I rather fancy I need a little patching up."

MacDonald uttered not a word. From the balsam lean-to he brought out a small rubber bag and a towel. Into a canvas wash-basin he then turned a half pail of cold water, and Aldous got on his knees beside this. Not once did the old mountaineer speak while he was washing the blood from Aldous' face and hands. There was a shallow two-inch cut in his forehead, two deeper ones in his right cheek, and a gouge in his chin. There were a dozen cuts on his hands, none of them serious. Before he had finished MacDonald had used two thirds of a roll of court-plaster.

Then he spoke.

"You can soak them off in the morning," he said. "If you don't, the lady'll think yo're a red Indian on the warpath. Now, yo' fool, what have yo' gone an' done?"

Aldous told him what had happened, and before MacDonald could utter an expression of his feelings he admitted that he was an inexcusable idiot and that nothing MacDonald might say could drive that fact deeper home.

"If I'd come out after hearing what they had to say, we could have got DeBar at the end of a gun and settled the whole business," he finished. "As it is, we're in a mess."

MacDonald stretched his gaunt gray frame before the fire. He picked up his long rifle, and fingered the lock.

"You figger they'll get away with DeBar?"

"Yes, to-night."

MacDonald threw open the breech of his single-loader

and drew out a cartridge as long as his finger. Replacing it, he snapped the breech shut.

"Don't know as I'm pertic'lar sad over what's happened," he said, with a curious look at Aldous. "We might have got out of this without what you call strenu'us trouble. Now—it's *fight!* It's goin' to be a matter of guns an' bullets, Johnny—back in the mountains. You figger Rann an' the snake of a half-breed'll get the start of us. Let 'em have a start! They've got two hundred miles to go, an' two hundred miles to come back. Only—they won't come back!"

Under his shaggy brows the old hunter's eyes gleamed as he looked at Aldous.

"To-morrow we'll go to the grave," he added. "Yo're cur'ous to know what's goin' to happen when we find that grave, Johnny. So am I. I hope——"

"What do you hope?"

MacDonald shook his great gray head in the dying firelight.

"Let's go to bed, Johnny," he rumbled softly in his beard. "It's gettin' late."

CHAPTER XIV

TO SLEEP after the excitement through which he had passed, and with to-morrow's uncertainties ahead of him, seemed to Aldous a physical impossibility. Yet he slept, and soundly. It was MacDonald who roused him three hours later. They prepared a quick breakfast over a small fire, and Aldous heated water in which he soaked his face until the strips of court-plaster peeled off. The scratches were lividly evident, but, inasmuch as he had a choice of but two evils, he preferred that Joanne should see these instead of the abominable disfigurement of court-plaster strips.

Old Donald took one look at him through half-closed eyes.

"You look as though you'd come out of a tussle with a grizzly," he grinned. "Want some fresh court-plaster?"

"And look as though I'd come out of a circus—no!" retorted Aldous. "I'm invited to breakfast at the Blacktons', Mac. How the devil am I going to get out of it?"

"Tell 'em you're sick," chuckled the old hunter, who saw something funny in the appearance of Aldous' face. "Good Lord, how I'd liked to have seen you come through that window—in daylight!"

Aldous led off in the direction of the trail. MacDonald followed close behind him. It was dark—that almost ebon-black hour that precedes summer dawn in the

northern mountains. The moon had long ago disappeared in the west. When a few minutes later they paused in the little opening on the trail Aldous could just make out the shadowy form of the old mountaineer.

"I lost my gun when I jumped through the window, Mac," he explained. "There's another thirty-eight automatic in my kit at the corral. Bring that, and the .303 with the gold-bead sight—and plenty of ammunition. You'd better take that forty-four hip-cannon of yours along, as well as your rifle. Wish I could civilize you, Mac, so you'd carry one of the Savage automatics instead of that old brain-storm of fifty years ago!"

MacDonald gave a grunt of disgust that was like the whoof of a bear.

"It's done business all that time," he growled good humouredly. "An' it ain't ever made me jump through any window as I remember of, Johnny!"

"Enough," said Aldous, and in the gloom he gripped the other's hand. "You'll be there, Mac—in front of the Blacktons'—just as it's growing light?"

"That means in three quarters of an hour, Johnny. I'll be there. Three saddle-horses and a pack."

Where the trail divided they separated. Aldous went directly to the Blacktons'. As he had expected, the bungalow was alight. In the kitchen he saw Tom, the Oriental cook, busy preparing breakfast. Blackton himself, comfortably dressed in duck trousers and a smoking-jacket, and puffing on a pipe, opened the front door for him. The pipe almost fell from his mouth when he saw his friend's excoriated face.

"What in the name of Heaven!" he gasped.

"An accident," explained Aldous, with a suggestive shrug of his shoulders. "Blackton, I want you to do me another good turn. Tell the ladies anything you can think of—something reasonable. The truth is, I went through a window—a window with plenty of glass in it. Now how the deuce can I explain going through a window like a gentleman?"

With folded arms, Blackton inspected him thoughtfully for a moment.

"You can't," he said. "But I don't think you went through a window. I believe you fell over a cliff and were caught in an armful of wait-a-bit bushes. They're devilish those wait-a-bits!"

They shook hands.

"I'm ready to blow up with curiosity again," said Blackton. "But I'll play your game, Aldous."

A few minutes later Joanne and Peggy Blackton joined them. He saw again the quick flush of pleasure in Joanne's lovely face when she entered the room. It changed instantly when she saw the livid cuts in his skin. She came to him quickly, and gave him her hand. Her lips trembled, but she did not speak. Blackton accepted this as the psychological moment.

"What do you think of a man who'll wander off a trail, tumble over a ledge, and get mixed up in a bunch of wait-a-bit like *that?*" he demanded, laughing as though he thought it a mighty good joke on Aldous. "Wait-a-bit thorns are worse than razors, Miss Gray," he elucidated further. "They're—they're perfectly devilish, you know!"

"Indeed they *are*," emphasized Peggy Blackton, whom

her husband had given a quick look and a quicker nudge. "They're dreadful!"

Looking straight into Joanne's eyes, Aldous guessed that she did not believe, and scarcely heard, the Blacktons.

"I had a presentiment something was going to happen," she said, smiling at him. "I'm glad it was no worse than that."

She withdrew her hand, and turned to Peggy Blackton. To John's delight she had arranged her wonderful shining hair in a braid that rippled in a thick, sinuous rope of brown and gold below her hips. Peggy Blackton had in some way found a riding outfit for her slender figure, a typical mountain outfit, with short divided skirt, loose blouse, and leggings. She had never looked more beautiful to him. Her night's rest had restored the colour to her soft cheeks and curved lips; and in her eyes, when she looked at him again, there was a strange, glowing light that thrilled him. During the next half-hour he almost forgot his telltale disfigurements. At breakfast Paul and Peggy Blackton were beautifully oblivious of them. Once or twice he saw in Joanne's clear eyes a look which made him suspect that she had guessed very near to the truth.

MacDonald was prompt to the minute. Gray day, with its bars of golden tint, was just creeping over the shoulders of the eastern mountains when he rode up to the Blacktons'. The old hunter was standing close to the horse which Joanne was to ride when Aldous brought her out. Joanne gave him her hand, and for a moment MacDonald bowed his shaggy head over it. Five minutes later they were trailing up the rough wagon-road, MacDonald in the

lead, and Joanne and Aldous behind, with the single pack-horse between.

For several miles this wagon-trail reached back through the thick timber that filled the bottom between the two ranges of mountains. They had travelled but a short distance when Joanne drew her horse close in beside Aldous.

"I want to know what happened last night," she said. "Will you tell me?"

Aldous met her eyes frankly. He had made up his mind that she would believe only the truth, and he had decided to tell her at least a part of that. He would lay his whole misadventure to the gold. Leaning over the pommel of his saddle he recounted the occurrences of the night before, beginning with his search for Quade and the half-breed, and his experience with the woman who rode the bear. He left out nothing—except all mention of herself. He described the events lightly, not omitting those parts which appealed to him as being very near to comedy.

In spite of his effort to rob the affair of its serious aspect his recital had a decided effect upon Joanne. For some time after he had finished one of her small gloved hands clutched tightly at the pommel of her saddle; her breath came more quickly; the colour had ebbed from her cheeks, and she looked straight ahead, keeping her eyes from meeting his. He began to believe that in some way she was convinced he had not told her the whole truth, and was possibly displeased, when she again turned her face to him. It was tense and white. In it was the fear which, for a few minutes, she had tried to keep from him.

"They would have killed you?" she breathed.

"Perhaps they would only have given me a good scare," said Aldous. "But I didn't have time to wait and find out. I was very anxious to see MacDonald again. So I went through the window!"

"No, they would have killed you," said Joanne. "Perhaps I did wrong, Mr. Aldous, but I confided—a little—in Peggy Blackton last night. She seemed like a sister. I love her. And I wanted to confide in some one—a woman, like her. It wasn't much, but I told her what happened at Miette: about you, and Quade, and how I saw him at the station, and again—later, following us. And then—she told me! Perhaps she didn't know how it was frightening me, but she told me all about these men—Quade and Culver Rann. And now I'm more afraid of Culver Rann than Quade, and I've never seen him. They can't hurt me. But I'm afraid for you!"

At her words a joy that was like the heat of a fire leaped into his brain.

"For me?" he said. "Afraid—for me?"

"Yes. Why shouldn't I be, if I know that you are in danger?" she asked quietly. "And now, since last night, and the discovery of your secret by these men, I am terrified. Quade has followed you here. Mrs. Blackton told me that Culver Rann was many times more dangerous than Quade. Only a little while ago you told me you did not care for riches. Then why do you go for this gold? Why do you run the risk? Why——"

He waited. The colour was flooding back into her face in an excited, feverish flush. Her blue eyes were dark as thunder-clouds in their earnestness.

"Don't you understand?" she went on. "It was

because of me that you incurred this deadly enmity of Quade's. If anything happens to you, I shall hold myself responsible!"

"No, you will not be responsible," replied Aldous, steadying the tremble in his voice. "Besides, nothing is going to happen. But you don't know how happy you have made me by taking this sort of an interest in me. It—it feels good," he laughed.

For a few paces he dropped behind her, where the overhead spruce boughs left but the space for a single rider between. Then, again, he drew up close beside her.

"I was going to tell you about this gold," he said. "It isn't the gold we're going after."

He leaned over until his hand rested on her saddle-bow.

"Look ahead," he went on, a curious softness in his voice. "Look at MacDonald!"

The first shattered rays of the sun were breaking over the mountains and reflecting their glow in the valley. Donald MacDonald had lifted his face to the sunrise; out from under his battered hat the morning breeze sweeping through the valley of the Frazer tossed his shaggy hair; his great owl-gray beard swept his breast; his broad, gaunt shoulders were hunched a little forward as he looked into the east. Again Aldous looked into Joanne's eyes.

"It's not the gold, but MacDonald, that's taking me north, Ladygray. And it's not the gold that is taking MacDonald. It is strange, almost unbelievedly strange—what I am going to tell you. To-day we are seeking a grave—for you. And up there, two hundred miles in the north, another grave is calling MacDonald. I am going with him. It just happens that the gold is there. You

wouldn't guess that for more than forty years that blessed old wanderer ahead of us has loved a dead woman, would you? You wouldn't think that for nearly half a century, year in and year out, winter and summer alike, he has tramped the northern mountains—a lost spirit with but one desire in life—to find at last her resting-place? And yet it is so, Ladygray. I guess I am the only living creature to whom he has opened his heart in many a long year. A hundred times beside our campfire I have listened to him, until at last his story seems almost to be a part of my own. He may be a little mad, but it is a beautiful madness."

He paused.

"Yes," whispered Joanne. "Go on—John Aldous."

"It's—hard to tell," he continued. "I can't put the feeling of it in words, the spirit of it, the wonder of it. I've tried to write it, and I couldn't. Her name was Jane. He has never spoken of her by any other name than that, and I've never asked for the rest of it. They were kids when their two families started West over the big prairies in Conestoga wagons. They grew up sweethearts. Both of her parents, and his mother, died before they were married. Then, a little later, his father died, and they were alone. I can imagine what their love must have been. I have seen it still living in his eyes, and I have seen it in his strange hour-long dreams after he has talked of her. They were always together. He has told me how they roamed the mountains hand in hand in their hunts; how she was comrade and chum when he went prospecting. He has opened his lonely old heart to me—a great deal. He's told me how they used to be alone for

months at a time in the mountains, the things they used to do, and how she would sing for him beside their campfire at night. 'She had a voice sweet as an angel,' I remember he told me once. Then, more than forty years ago, came the gold-rush away up in the Stikine River country. They went. They joined a little party of twelve—ten men and two women. This party wandered far out of the beaten paths of the other gold-seekers. And at last they found gold."

Ahead of them Donald MacDonald had turned in his saddle and was looking back. For a moment Aldous ceased speaking.

"Please—go on!" said Joanne.

"They found gold," repeated Aldous. "They found so much of it, Ladygray, that some of them went mad—mad as beasts. It was placer gold—loose gold, and MacDonald says that one day he and Jane filled their pockets with nuggets. Then something happened. A great storm came; a storm that filled the mountains with snow through which no living creature as heavy as a man or a horse could make its way. It came a month earlier than they had expected, and from the beginning they were doomed. Their supplies were almost gone.

"I can't tell you the horrors of the weeks and months that followed, as old Donald has told them to me, Joanne. You must imagine. Only, when you are deep in the mountains, and the snow comes, you are like a rat in a trap. So they were caught—eleven men and three women. They who could make their beds in sheets of yellow gold, but who had no food. The horses were lost in the storm. Two of their frozen carcasses were found and used for food.

Two of the men set out on snowshoes, leaving their gold behind, and probably died.

"Then the first terrible thing happened. Two men quarrelled over a can of beans, and one was killed. He was the husband of one of the women. The next terrible thing happened to her—and there was a fight. On one side there were young Donald and the husband of the other woman; on the other side—the beasts. The husband was killed, and Donald and Jane sought refuge in the log cabin they had built. That night they fled, taking what little food they possessed, and what blankets they could carry. They knew they were facing death. But they went together, hand in hand.

"At last Donald found a great cave in the side of a mountain. I have a picture of that cave in my brain—a deep, warm cave, with a floor of soft white sand, a cave into which the two exhausted fugitives stumbled, still hand in hand, and which was home. But they found it a little too late. Three days later Jane died. And there is another picture in my brain—a picture of young Donald sitting there in the cave, clasping in his arms the cold form of the one creature in the world that he loved; moaning and sobbing over her, calling upon her to come back to life, to open her eyes, to speak to him—until at last his brain cracked and he went mad. That is what happened. He went mad."

Joanne's breath was coming brokenly through her lips. Unconsciously she had clasped her fingers about the hand Aldous rested on her pommel.

"How long he remained in the cave with his dead, MacDonald has never been able to say," he resumed.

"He doesn't know whether he buried his wife or left her lying on the sand floor of the cave. He doesn't know how he got out of the mountains. But he did, and his mind came back. And since then, Joanne—for a matter of forty years—his life has been spent in trying to find that cave. All those years his search was unavailing. He could find no trace of the little hidden valley in which the treasure-seekers found their bonanza of gold. No word of it ever came out of the mountains; no other prospector ever stumbled upon it. Year after year Donald went into the North; year after year he came out as the winter set in, but he never gave up hope.

"Then he began spending winter as well as summer in that forgotten world—forgotten because the early gold-rush was over, and the old Telegraph trail was travelled more by wolves than men. And always, Donald has told me, his beloved Jane's spirit was with him in his wanderings over the mountains, her hand leading him, her voice whispering to him in the loneliness of the long nights. Think of it, Joanne! Forty years of that! Forty years of a strange, beautiful madness, forty years of undying love, of faith, of seeking and never finding! And this spring old Donald came almost to the end of his quest. He knows, now; he knows where that little treasure valley is hidden in the mountains, he knows where to find the cave!"

"He found her—he found her?" she cried. "After all those years—he found her?"

"Almost," said Aldous softly. "But the great finale in the tragedy of Donald MacDonald's life is yet to come, Ladygray. It will come when once more he stands in the

soft white sand of that cavern floor, and sometimes I tremble when I think that when that moment comes I will be at his side. To me it will be terrible. To him it will be—what? That hour has not quite arrived. It happened this way: Old Donald was coming down from the North on the early slush snows this spring when he came to a shack in which a man was almost dead of the smallpox. It was DeBar, the half-breed.

"Fearlessly MacDonald nursed him. He says it was God who sent him to that shack. For DeBar, in his feverish ravings, revealed the fact that he had stumbled upon that little Valley of Gold for which MacDonald had searched through forty years. Old Donald knew it was the same valley, for the half-breed raved of dead men, of rotting buckskin sacks of yellow nuggets, of crumbling log shacks, and of other things the memories of which stabbed like knives into Donald's heart. How he fought to save that man! And, at last, he succeeded.

"They continued south, planning to outfit and go back for the gold. They would have gone back at once, but they had no food and no horses. Foot by foot, in the weeks that followed, DeBar described the way to the hidden valley, until at last MacDonald knew that he could go to it as straight as an eagle to its nest. When they reached Tête Jaune he came to me. And I promised to go with him, Ladygray—back to the Valley of Gold. He calls it that; but I—I think of it as The Valley of Silent Men. It is not the gold, but the cavern with the soft white floor that is calling us."

In her saddle Joanne had straightened. Her head was thrown back, her lips were parted, and her eyes shone as

the eyes of a Joan of Arc must have shone when she stood that day before the Hosts.

"And this man, the half-breed, has sold himself—for a woman?" she said, looking straight ahead at the bent shoulders of old MacDonald.

"Yes, for a woman. Do you ask me why I go now? Why I shall fight, if fighting there must be?"

She turned to him. Her face was a blaze of glory.

"No, no, no!" she cried. "Oh, John Aldous! if I were only a man, that I might go with you and stand with you two in that Holy Sepulchre—the Cavern—— If I were a man, I'd go—and, yes, I would fight!"

And Donald MacDonald, looking back, saw the two clasping hands across the trail. A moment later he turned his horse from the broad road into a narrow trail that led over the range.

CHAPTER XV

FROM the hour in which she had listened to the story of old MacDonald a change seemed to have come over Joanne. It was as if she had risen out of herself, out of whatever fear or grief she might have possessed in her own heart. John Aldous knew that there was some deep significance in her visit to the grave under the Saw Tooth Mountain, and that from the beginning she had been fighting under a tremendous mental and physical strain. He had expected this day would be a terrible day for her; he had seen her efforts to strengthen herself for the approaching crisis that morning. He believed that as they drew nearer to their journey's end her suspense and uneasiness, the fear which she was trying to keep from him, would, in spite of her, become more and more evident. For these reasons the change which he saw in her was not only delightfully unexpected but deeply puzzling. She seemed to be under the influence of some new and absorbing excitement. Her cheeks were flushed. There was a different poise to her head; in her voice, too, there was a note which he had not noticed before.

It struck him, all at once, that this was a new Joanne—a Joanne who, at least for a brief spell, had broken the bondage of oppression and fear that had fettered her. In the narrow trail up the mountain he rode behind her, and in this he found a pleasure even greater than when he

rode at her side. Only when her face was turned from him did he dare surrender himself at all to the emotions which had transformed his soul. From behind he could look at her, and worship without fear of discovery. Every movement of her slender, graceful body gave him a new and exquisite thrill; every dancing light and every darkening shadow in her shimmering hair added to the joy that no fear or apprehension could overwhelm within him now. Only in those wonderful moments, when her presence was so near, and yet her eyes did not see him, could he submerge himself completely in the thought of what she had become to him and of what she meant to him.

During the first hour of their climb over the break that led into the valley beyond they had but little opportunity for conversation. The trail was an abandoned Indian path, narrow, and in places extremely steep. Twice Aldous helped Joanne from her horse that she might travel afoot over places which he considered dangerous. When he assisted her in the saddle again, after a stiff ascent of a hundred yards, she was panting from her exertion, and he felt the sweet thrill of her breath in his face. For a space his happiness obliterated all thoughts of other things. It was MacDonald who brought them back.

They had reached the summit of the break, and through his long brass telescope the old mountaineer was scanning the valley out of which they had come. Under them lay Tête Jaune, gleaming in the morning sun, and it dawned suddenly upon Aldous that this was the spot from which MacDonald had spied upon his enemies. He looked at Joanne. She was breathing quickly as she looked upon

the wonder of the scene below them. Suddenly she turned, and encountered his eyes.

"They might—follow?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"No danger of that," he assured her.

MacDonald had dismounted, and now he lay crouched behind a rock, with his telescope resting over the top of it. He had leaned his long rifle against the boulder; his huge forty-four, a relic of the old Indian days, hung at his hip. Joanne saw these omens of preparedness, and her eyes shifted again to Aldous. His .303 swung from his saddle. At his waist was the heavy automatic. She smiled. In her eyes was understanding, and something like a challenge. She did not question him again, but under her gaze Aldous flushed.

A moment later MacDonald closed his telescope and without a word mounted his horse. Where the descent into the second valley began he paused again. To the north through the haze of the morning sun gleamed the snow-capped peaks of the Saw Tooth Range. Apparently not more than an hour's ride distant rose a huge red sandstone giant which seemed to shut in the end of the valley. MacDonald stretched forth a long arm in its direction.

"What we're seekin' is behind that mountain," he said. "It's ten miles from here." He turned to the girl. "Are you gettin' lame, Mis' Joanne?"

Aldous saw her lips tighten.

"No. Let us go on, please."

She was staring fixedly at the sombre red mass of the mountain. Her eyes did not take in the magnificent

sweep of the valley below. They saw nothing of the snow-capped peaks beyond. There was something wild and unnatural in their steady gaze. Aldous dropped behind her as they began the gradual descent from the crest of the break and his own heart began to beat more apprehensively; the old question flashed back upon him, and he felt again the oppression that once before had held him in its grip. His eyes did not leave Joanne. And always she was staring at the mountain behind which lay the thing they were seeking! It was not Joanne herself that set his blood throbbing. Her face had not paled. Its colour was like the hectic flush of a fever. Her eyes alone betrayed her; their strange intensity—the almost painful steadiness with which they hung to the distant mountain, and a dread of what was to come seized upon him. Again he found himself asking himself questions which he could not answer. Why had Joanne not confided more fully in him? What was the deeper significance of this visit to the grave, and of her mission in the mountains?

Down the narrow Indian trail they passed into the thick spruce timber. Half an hour later they came out into the grassy creek bottom of the valley. During that time Joanne did not look behind her, and John Aldous did not speak. MacDonald turned north, and the sandstone mountain was straight ahead of them. It was not like the other mountains. There was something sinister and sullen about it. It was ugly and broken. No vegetation grew upon it, and through the haze of sunlight its barren sides and battlemented crags gleamed a dark and humid red after the morning mists, as if freshly stained with blood. Aldous guessed its effect upon Joanne, and he

determined to put an end to it. Again he rode up close beside her.

"I want you to get better acquainted with old Donald," he said. "We're sort of leaving him out in the cold, Ladygray. Do you mind if I tell him to come back and ride with you for a while?"

"I've been wanting to talk with him," she replied. "If you don't mind——"

"I don't," he broke in quickly. "You'll love old Donald, Ladygray. And, if you can, I'd like to have you tell him all that you know about—Jane. Let him know that I told you."

She nodded. Her lips trembled in a smile.

"I will," she said.

A moment later Aldous was telling MacDonald that Joanne wanted him. The old mountaineer stared. He drew his pipe from his mouth, beat out its half-burned contents, and thrust it into its accustomed pocket.

"She wants to see me?" he asked. "God bless her soul—what for?"

"Because she thinks you're lonesome up here alone, Mac. And look here"—Aldous leaned over to MacDonald—"her nerves are ready to snap. I know it. There's a mighty good reason why I can't relieve the strain she is under. But you can. She's thinking every minute of that mountain up there and the grave behind it. You go back, and talk. Tell her about the first time you ever came up through these valleys—you and Jane. Will you, Mac? Will you tell her that?"

MacDonald did not reply, but he dropped behind. Aldous took up the lead. A few minutes later he looked

back, and laughed softly under his breath. Joanne and the old hunter were riding side by side in the creek bottom, and Joanne was talking. He looked at his watch. He did not look at it again until the first gaunt, red shoulder of the sandstone mountain began to loom over them. An hour had passed since he left Joanne. Ahead of him, perhaps a mile distant, was the cragged spur beyond which—according to the sketch Keller had drawn for him at the engineers' camp—was the rough canyon leading back to the basin on the far side of the mountain. He had almost reached this when MacDonald rode up.

"You go back, Johnny," he said, a singular softness in his hollow voice. "We're a'most there."

He cast his eyes over the western peaks, where dark clouds were shouldering their way up in the face of the sun, and added:

"There's rain in that. I'll trot on ahead with Pinto and have a tent ready when you come. I reckon it can't be more'n a mile up the canyon."

"And the grave, Mac?"

"Is right close to where I'll pitch the tent," said MacDonald, swinging suddenly behind the pack-horse Pinto, and urging him into a trot. "Don't waste any time, Johnny."

Aldous rode back to Joanne.

"It looks like rain," he explained. "These Pacific showers come up quickly this side of the Divide, and they drench you in a jiffy. Donald is going on ahead to put up a tent."

By the time they reached the mouth of the canyon MacDonald was out of sight. A little creek that was a

swollen torrent in spring time trickled out of the gorge. Its channel was choked with a chaotic confusion of sandstone rock and broken slate, and up through this Aldous carefully picked his way, followed closely by Joanne. The sky continued to darken above them, until at last the sun died out, and a thick and almost palpable gloom began to envelop them. Low thunder rolled through the mountains in sullen, rumbling echoes. He looked back at Joanne, and was amazed to see her eyes shining, and a smile on her lips as she nodded at him.

"It makes me think of Henrik Hudson and his ten-pin players," she called softly. "And ahead of us—is Rip Van Winkle!"

The first big drops were beginning to fall when they came to an open place. The gorge swung to the right; on their left the rocks gave place to a rolling meadow of buffalo grass, and Aldous knew they had reached the basin. A hundred yards up the slope was a fringe of timber, and as he looked he saw smoke rising out of this. The sound of MacDonald's axe came to them. He turned to Joanne, and he saw that she understood. They were at their journey's end. Perhaps her fingers gripped her rein a little more tightly. Perhaps it was imagination that made him think there was a slight tremble in her voice when she said:

"This—is the place?"

"Yes. It should be just above the timber. I believe I can see the upper break of the little box canyon Keller told me about."

She rode without speaking until they entered the timber. They were just in time. As he lifted her down from her

horse the clouds opened, and the rain fell in a deluge. Her hair was wet when he got her in the tent. MacDonald had spread out a number of blankets, but he had disappeared. Joanne sank down upon them with a little shiver. She looked up at Aldous. It was almost dark in the tent, and her eyes were glowing strangely. Over them the thunder crashed deafeningly. For a few minutes it was a continual roar, shaking the mountains with mighty reverberations that were like the explosions of giant guns. Aldous stood holding the untied flap against the beat of the rain. Twice he saw Joanne's lips form words. At last he heard her say:

"Where is Donald?"

He tied the flap, and dropped down on the edge of the blankets before he answered her.

"Probably out in the open watching the lightning, and letting the rain drench him," he said. "I've never known old Donald to come in out of a rain, unless it was cold. He was tying up the horses when I ran in here with you."

He believed she was shivering, yet he knew she was not cold. In the half gloom of the tent he wanted to reach over and take her hand.

For a few minutes longer there was no break in the steady downpour and the crashing of the thunder. Then, as suddenly as the storm had broken, it began to subside. Aldous rose and flung back the tent-flap.

"It is almost over," he said. "You had better remain in the tent a little longer, Ladygray. I will go out and see if MacDonald has succeeded in drowning himself."

Joanne did not answer, and Aldous stepped outside. He knew where to find the old hunter. He had gone up to the end of the timber, and probably this minute was in the little box canyon searching for the grave. It was a matter of less than a hundred yards to the upper fringe of timber, and when Aldous came out of this he stood on the summit of the grassy divide that separated the tiny lake Keller had described from the canyon. It was less than a rifle shot distant, and on the farther side of it MacDonald was already returning. Aldous hurried down to meet him. He did not speak when they met, but his companion answered the question in his eyes, while the water dripped in streams from his drenched hair and beard.

"It's there," he said, pointing back. "Just behind that big black rock. There's a slab over it, an' you've got the name right. It's Mortimer FitzHugh."

Above them the clouds were splitting asunder. A shaft of sunlight broke through, and as they stood looking over the little lake the shaft broadened, and the sun swept in golden triumph over the mountains. MacDonald beat his limp hat against his knee, and with his other hand drained the water from his beard.

"What you goin' to do?" he asked.

Aldous turned toward the timber. Joanne herself answered the question. She was coming up the slope. In a few moments she stood beside them. First she looked down upon the lake. Then her eyes turned to Aldous. There was no need for speech. He held out his hand, and without hesitation she gave him her own. MacDonald understood. He walked down ahead of them toward the black rock. When he came to the rock he paused. Aldous

and Joanne passed him. Then they, too, stopped, and Aldous freed the girl's hand.

With an unexpectedness that was startling they had come upon the grave. Yet not a sound escaped Joanne's lips. Aldous could not see that she was breathing. Less than ten paces from them was the mound, protected by its cairn of stones; and over the stones rose a weather-stained slab in the form of a cross. One glance at the gravel and Aldous riveted his eyes upon Joanne. For a full minute she stood as motionless as though the last breath had left her body. Then, slowly, she advanced. He could not see her face. He followed, quietly, step by step as she moved. For another minute she leaned over the slab, making out the fine-seared letters of the name. Her body was bent forward; her two hands were clenched tightly at her side. Even more slowly than she had advanced she turned toward Aldous and MacDonald. Her face was dead white. She lifted her hands to her breast, and clenched them there.

"It is his name," she said, and there was something repressed and terrible in her low voice. "It is his name!"

She was looking straight into the eyes of John Aldous, and he saw that she was fighting to say something which she had not spoken. Suddenly she came to him, and her two hands caught his arm.

"It is terrible—what I am going to ask of you," she struggled. "You will think I am a ghoul. But I must have proof! I must—I must!"

She was staring wildly at him, and all at once there leapt fiercely through him a dawning of the truth. The

name was there, seared by hot iron in that slab of wood The name! But under the cairn of stones——

Behind them MacDonald had heard. He towered beside them now. His great mountain-twisted hands drew Joanne a step back, and strange gentleness was in his voice as he said:

"You an' Johnny go back an' build a fire, Mis' Joanne. I'll find the proof!"

"Come," said Aldous, and he held out his hand again.

MacDonald hurried on ahead of them. When they reached the camp he was gone, so that Joanne did not see the pick and shovel which he carried back. She went into the tent and Aldous began building a fire where MacDonald's had been drowned out. There was little reason for a fire; but he built it, and for fifteen minutes added pitch-heavy fagots of storm-killed jack-pine and spruce to it, until the flames leapt a dozen feet into the air. Half a dozen times he was impelled to return to the grave and assist MacDonald in his gruesome task. But he knew that MacDonald had meant that he should stay with Joanne. If he returned, she might follow.

He was surprised at the quickness with which MacDonald performed his work. Not more than half an hour had passed when a low whistle drew his eyes to a clump of dwarf spruce back in the timber. The mountaineer was standing there, holding something in his hand. With a backward glance to see that Joanne had not come from the tent, Aldous hastened to him. What he could see of MacDonald's face was the lifeless colour of gray ash. His eyes stared as if he had suffered a strange and unexpected shock. He went to speak, but no words came through his

beard. In his hand he held his faded red neck-handkerchief. He gave it to Aldous.

"It wasn't deep," he said. "It was shallow, turribly shallow, Johnny—just under the stone!"

His voice was husky and unnatural.

There was something heavy in the handkerchief, and a shudder passed through Aldous as he placed it on the palm of his hand and unveiled its contents. He could not repress an exclamation when he saw what MacDonald had brought. In his hand, with a single thickness of the wet handkerchief between the objects and his flesh, lay a watch and a ring. The watch was of gold. It was tarnished, but he could see there were initials, which he could not make out, engraved on the back of the case. The ring, too, was of gold. It was one of the most gruesome ornaments Aldous had ever seen. It was in the form of a coiled and writhing serpent, wide enough to cover half of one's middle finger between the joints. Again the eyes of the two men met, and again Aldous observed that strange, stunned look in the old hunter's face. He turned and walked back toward the tent, MacDonald following him slowly, still staring, his long gaunt arms and hands hanging limply at his side.

Joanne heard them, and came out of the tent. A choking cry fell from her lips when she saw MacDonald. For a moment one of her hands clutched at the wet canvas of the tent, and then she swayed forward, knowing what John Aldous had in his hand. He stood voiceless while she looked. In that tense half-minute when she stared at the objects he held it seemed to him that her heart-strings must snap under the strain. Then she drew back

from them, her eyes filled with horror, her hands raised as if to shut out the sight of them, and a panting, sobbing cry broke from between her pallid lips.

"Oh, my God!" she breathed. "Take them away—take them away!"

She staggered back to the tent, and stood there with her hands covering her face. Aldous turned to the old hunter and gave him the things he held.

A moment later he stood alone where the three had been, staring now as Joanne had stared, his heart beating wildly.

For Joanne, in entering the tent, had uncovered her face; it was not grief that he saw there, but the soul of a woman new-born. And as his own soul responded in a wild rejoicing, MacDonald, going over the summit and down into the hollow, mumbled in his beard:

"God ha' mercy on me! I'm doin' it for her an' Johnny, an' because she's like my Jane!"

CHAPTER XVI

PLUNGED from one extreme of mental strain to another excitement that was as acute in its opposite effect, John Aldous stood and stared at the tent-flap that had dropped behind Joanne. Only a flash he had caught of her face; but in that flash he had seen the living, quivering joyousness of freedom blazing where a moment before there had been only horror and fear. As if ashamed of her own betrayal, Joanne had darted into the tent. She had answered his question a thousand times more effectively than if she had remained to tell him with her lips that MacDonald's proofs were sufficient—that the grave in the little box canyon had not disappointed her. She had recognized the ring and the watch; from them she had shrank in horror, as if fearing that the golden serpent might suddenly leap into life and strike.

In spite of the mightiest efforts she might have made for self-control Aldous had seen in her tense and tortured face a look that was more than either dread or shock—it was abhorrence, hatred. And his last glimpse of her face had revealed those things gone, and in their place the strange joy she had run into the tent to hide. That she should rejoice over the dead, or that the grim relics from the grave should bring that new dawn into her face and eyes, did not strike him as shocking. In Joanne his sun had already begun to rise and set. He had come to under-

stand that for her the grave must hold its dead; that the fact of death, death under the slab that bore Mortimer FitzHugh's name, meant life for her, just as it meant life and all things for him. He had prayed for it, even while he dreaded that it might not be. In him all things were now submerged in the wild thought that Joanne was free, and the grave had been the key to her freedom.

A calmness began to possess him that was in singular contrast to the perturbed condition of his mind a few minutes before. From this hour Joanne was his to fight for, to win if he could; and, knowing this, his soul rose in triumph above his first physical exultation, and he fought back the almost irresistible impulse to follow her into the tent and tell her what this day had meant for him. Following this came swiftly a realization of what it had meant for her—the suspense, the terrific strain, the final shock and gruesome horror of it. He was sure, without seeing, that she was huddled down on the blankets in the tent. She had passed through an ordeal under which a strong man might have broken, and the picture he had of her struggle in there alone turned him from the tent filled with a determination to make her believe that the events of the morning, both with him and MacDonald, were easily forgotten.

He began to whistle as he threw back the wet canvas from over the camp outfit that had been taken from Pinto's back. In one of the two cow-hide panniers he saw that thoughtful old Donald had packed materials for their dinner, as well as utensils necessary for its preparation. That dinner they would have in the valley, well beyond the red mountain. He began to repack, whistling cheerily.

He was still whistling when MacDonald returned. He broke off sharply when he saw the other's face.

"What's the matter, Mac?" he asked. "You sick?"

"It weren't pleasant, Johnny."

Aldous nodded toward the tent.

"It was—beastly," he whispered. "But we can't let her feel that way about it, Mac. Cheer up—and let's get out of this place. We'll have dinner somewhere over in the valley."

They continued packing until only the tent remained to be placed on Pinto's back. Aldous resumed his loud whistling as he tightened up the saddle-girths, and killed time in half a dozen other ways. A quarter of an hour passed. Still Joanne did not appear. Aldous scratched his head dubiously, and looked at the tent.

"I don't want to disturb her, Mac," he said in a low voice. "Let's keep up the bluff of being busy. We can put out the fire."

Ten minutes later, sweating and considerably smoke-grimed, Aldous again looked toward the tent.

"We might cut down a few trees," suggested MacDonald.

"Or play leap-frog," added Aldous.

"The trees 'd sound more natcherel," said MacDonald. "We could tell her——"

A stick snapped behind them. Both turned at the same instant. Joanne stood facing them not ten feet away.

"Great Scott!" gasped Aldous. "Joanne, I thought you were in the tent!"

The beautiful calmness in Joanne's face amazed him.

He stared at her as he spoke, forgetting altogether the manner in which he had intended to greet her when she came from the tent.

"I went out the back way—lifted the canvas and crawled under just like a boy," she explained. "And I've walked until my feet are wet."

"And the fire is out!"

"I don't mind wet feet," she hurried to assure him.

Old Donald was already at work pulling the tent-pegs. Joanne came close to Aldous, and he saw again that deep and wonderful light in her eyes. This time he knew that she meant he should see it, and words which he had determined not to speak fell softly from his lips.

"You are no longer afraid, Ladygray? That which you dreaded——"

"Is dead," she said. "And you, John Aldous? Without knowing, seeing me only as you have seen me, do you think that I am terrible?"

"No, I could not think that."

Her hand touched his arm.

"Will you go out there with me, in the sunlight, where we can look down upon the little lake?" she asked. "Until to-day I had made up my mind that no one but myself would ever know the truth. But you have been good to me, and I must tell you—about myself—about him."

He found no answer. He left no word with MacDonald. Until they stood on the grassy knoll, with the lakelet shimmering in the sunlight below them, Joanne herself did not speak again. Then, with a little gesture, she said:

"Perhaps you think what is down there is dreadful to me. It isn't. I shall always remember that little lake,

almost as Donald remembers the cavern—not because it watches over something I love, but because it guards a thing that in life would have destroyed me! I know how you must feel, John Aldous—that deep down in your heart you must wonder at a woman who can rejoice in the death of another human creature. Yet death, and death alone, has been the key from bondage of millions of souls that have lived before mine; and there are men—men, too—whose lives have been warped and destroyed because death did not come to save them. One was my father. If death had come for him, if it had taken my mother, that down there would never have happened—for me!"

She spoke the terrible words so quietly, so calmly, that it was impossible for him entirely to conceal their effect upon him. There was a bit of pathos in her smile.

"My mother drove my father mad," she went on, with a simple directness that was the most wonderful thing he had ever heard come from human lips. "The world did not know that he was mad. It called him eccentric. But he was mad—in just one way. I was nine years old when it happened, and I can remember our home most vividly. It was a beautiful home. And my father! Need I tell you that I worshipped him—that to me he was king of all men? And as deeply as I loved him, so, in another way, he worshipped my mother. She was beautiful. In a curious sort of way I used to wonder, as a child, how it was possible for a woman to be so beautiful. It was a dark beauty—a recurrence of French strain in her English blood.

"One day I overheard my father tell her that, if she died, he would kill himself. He was not of the passionate,

over-sentimental kind; he was a philosopher, a scientist, calm and self-contained—and I remembered those words later, when I had outgrown childhood, as one of a hundred proofs of how devoutly he had loved her. It was more than love, I believe. It was adoration. I was nine, I say, when things happened. Another man, a divorce, and on the day of the divorce this woman, my mother, married her lover. Somewhere in my father's brain a single thread snapped, and from that day he was mad—mad on but one subject; and so deep and intense was his madness that it became a part of me as the years passed, and to-day I, too, am possessed of that madness. And it is the one greatest thing in the world that I am proud of, John Aldous!"

Not once had her voice betrayed excitement or emotion. Not once had it risen above its normal tone; and in her eyes, as they turned from the lake to him, there was the tranquillity of a child.

"And that madness," she resumed, "was the madness of a man whose brain and soul were overwrought in one colossal hatred—a hatred of divorce and the laws that made it possible. It was born in him in a day, and it lived until his death. It turned him from the paths of men, and we became wanderers upon the face of the earth. Two years after the ruin of our home my mother and the man she had married died in a ship that was lost at sea. This had no effect upon my father. Possibly you will not understand what grew up between us in the years and years that followed. To the end he was a scientist, a man seeking after the unknown, and my education came to be a composite of teachings gathered in all parts of the world. We were never apart. We were more than father

and daughter; we were friends, comrades—he was my world, and I was his.

"I recall, as I became older, how his hatred of that thing that had broken our home developed more and more strongly in me. His mind was titanic. A thousand times I pleaded with him to employ it in the great fight I wanted him to make—a fight against the crime divorce. I know, now, why he did not. He was thinking of me. Only one thing he asked of me. It was more than a request. It was a command. And this command, and my promise, was that so long as I lived—no matter what might happen in my life—I would sacrifice myself body and soul sooner than allow that black monster of divorce to fasten its clutches on me. It is futile for me to tell you these things, John Aldous. It is impossible—you cannot understand!"

"I can," he replied, scarcely above a whisper. "Joanne, I begin—to understand!"

And still without emotion, her voice as calm as the unruffled lake at their feet, she continued:

"It grew in me. It is a part of me now. I hate divorce as I hate the worst sin that bars one from Heaven. It is the one thing I hate. And it is because of this hatred that I suffered myself to remain the wife of the man whose name is over that grave down there—Mortimer FitzHugh. It came about strangely—what I am going to tell you now. You will wonder. You will think I was insane. But remember, John Aldous—the world had come to hold but one friend and comrade for me, and he was my father. It was after Mindano. He caught the fever, and he was dying."

For the first time her breath choked her. It was only for an instant. She recovered herself, and went on:

"Out of the world my father had left he had kept one friend—Richard FitzHugh; and this man, with his son, was with us during those terrible days of fever. I met Mortimer as I had met a thousand other men. His father, I thought, was the soul of honour, and I accepted the son as such. We were much together during those two weeks of my despair, and he seemed to be attentive and kind. Then came the end. My father was dying. And I—I was ready to die. In his last moments his one thought was of me. He knew I was alone, and the fear of it terrified him. I believe he did not realize then what he was asking of me. He pleaded with me to marry the son of his old friend before he died. And I—John Aldous, I could not fight his last wish as he lay dying before my eyes. We were married there at his bedside. He joined our hands. And the words he whispered to me last of all were: 'Remember—Joanne—thy promise and thine honour!'"

For a moment Joanne stood facing the little lake, and when she spoke again there was a note of thankfulness, of subdued joy and triumph, in her voice.

"Before that day had ended I had displeased Mortimer FitzHugh," she said, and Aldous saw the fingers of her hands close tightly. "I told him that until a month had passed I would not live with him as a wife lives with her husband. And he was displeased. And my father was not yet buried! I was shocked. My soul revolted.

"We went to London and I was made welcome in the older FitzHugh's wifeless home, and the papers told of our

wedding. And two days later there came from Devonshire a woman—a sweet-faced little woman with sick, haunted eyes; in her arms she brought a baby; and that baby *was Mortimer FitzHugh's!*

"We confronted him—the mother, the baby, and I; and then I knew that he was a fiend. And the father was a fiend. They offered to buy the woman off, to support her and the child. They told me that many English gentlemen had made mistakes like this, and that it was nothing—that it was quite common. Mortimer FitzHugh had never touched me with his lips, and now, when he came to touch me with his hands, I struck him. It was a serpent's house, and I left it.

"My father had left me a comfortable fortune, and I went into a house of my own. Day after day they came to me, and I knew that they feared I was going to secure a divorce. During the six months that followed I learned other things about the man who was legally my husband. He was everything that was vile. Brazenly he went into public places with women of dishonour, and I hid my face in shame.

"His father died, and for a time Mortimer FitzHugh became one of the talked-about spendthrifts of London. Swiftly he gambled and dissipated himself into comparative poverty. And now, learning that I would not get a divorce, he began to regard me as a slave in chains. I remember, one time, that he succeeded in laying his hands on me, and they were like the touch of things that were slimy and poisonous. He laughed at my revulsion. He demanded money of me, and to keep him away from me I gave it to him. Again and again he came for money;

I suffered as I cannot tell you, but never once in my misery did I weaken in my promise to my father and to myself. But—at last—I ran away.

"I went to Egypt, and then to India. A year later I learned that Mortimer FitzHugh had gone to America, and I returned to London. For two years I heard nothing of him; but day and night I lived in fear and dread. And then came the news that he had died, as you read in the newspaper clipping. I was free! For a year I believed that; and then, like a shock that had come to destroy me, I was told that he *was not dead* but that he was alive, and in a place called Tête Jaune Cache, in British Columbia. I could not live in the terrible suspense that followed. I determined to find out for myself if he was alive or dead. And so I came, John Aldous. And he is dead. He is down there—dead. And I am glad that he is dead!"

"And if he was not dead," said Aldous quietly, "I would kill him!"

He could find nothing more to say than that. He dared trust himself no further, and in silence he held out his hands, and for a moment Joanne gave him her own. Then she withdrew them, and with a little gesture, and the smile which he loved to see trembling about her mouth, she said:

"Donald will think this is scandalous. We must go back and apologize!"

She led him down the slope, and her face was filled with the pink flush of a wild rose when she ran up to Donald, and asked him to help her into her saddle. John Aldous rode like one in a dream as they went back into the valley, for with each minute that passed Joanne seemed more and

more to him like a beautiful bird that had escaped from its prison-cage, and in him mind and soul were absorbed in the wonder of it and in his own rejoicing. She was free, and in her freedom she was happy!

Free! It was that thought that pounded steadily in his brain. He forgot Quade, and Culver Rann, and the gold; he forgot his own danger, his own work, almost his own existence. Of a sudden the world had become infinitesimally small for him, and all he could see was the soft shimmer of Joanne's hair in the sun, the wonder of her face, the marvellous blue of her eyes—and all he could hear was the sweet thrill of her voice when she spoke to him or old Donald, and when, now and then, soft laughter trembled on her lips in the sheer joy of the life that had dawned anew for her this day.

They stopped for dinner, and then went on over the range and down into the valley where lay Tête Jaune. And all this time he fought to keep from flaming in his own face the desire that was like a hot fire within him—the desire to go to Joanne and tell her that he loved her as he had never dreamed it possible for love to exist in the whole wide world. He knew that to surrender to that desire in this hour would be something like sacrilege. He did not guess that Joanne saw his struggle, that even old MacDonald mumbled low words in his beard. When they came at last to Blackton's bungalow he thought that he had kept this thing from her, and he did not see—and would not have understood if he had seen—the wonderful and mysterious glow in Joanne's eyes when she kissed Peggy Blackton.

Blackton had come in from the work-end, dust-covered and jubilant.

"I'm glad you folks have returned," he cried, beaming with enthusiasm as he gripped Aldous by the hand. "The last rock is packed, and to-night we're going to shake the earth. We're going to blow up Coyote Number Twenty-seven, and you won't forget the sight as long as you live!"

Not until Joanne had disappeared into the house with Peggy Blackton did Aldous feel that he had descended firmly upon his feet once more into a matter-of-fact world. MacDonald was waiting with the horses, and Blackton was pointing over toward the steel workers, and was saying something about ten thousand pounds of black powder and dynamite and a mountain that had stood a million years and was going to be blown up that night.

"It's the best bit of work I've ever done, Aldous—that and Coyote Number Twenty-eight. Peggy was going to touch the electric button to Twenty-seven to-night, but we've decided to let Miss Gray do that, and Peggy'll fire Twenty-eight to-morrow night. Twenty-eight is almost ready. If you say so, the bunch of us will go over and see it in the morning. Mebby Miss Gray would like to see for herself that a coyote isn't only an animal with a bushy tail, but a cavern dug into rock an' filled with enough explosives to play high jinks with all the navies in the world if they happened to be on hand at the time. What do you say?"

"Fine!" said Aldous.

"And Peggy wants me to say that it's a matter of only common, every-day decency on your part to make yourself our guest while here," added the contractor, stuffing his pipe. "We've got plenty of room, enough to eat, and

a comfortable bed for you. You're going to be polite enough to accept, aren't you?"

"With all my heart," exclaimed Aldous, his blood tingling at the thought of being near Joanne. "I've got some business with MacDonald and as soon as that's over I'll domicile myself here. It's bully of you, Blackton! You know——"

"Why, dammit, of course I know!" chuckled Blackton, lighting his pipe. "Can't I see, Aldous? D'ye think I'm blind? I was just as gone over Peggy before I married her. Fact is, I haven't got over it yet—and never will. I come up from the work four times a day regular to see her, and if I don't come I have to send up word I'm safe. Peggy saw it first. She said it was a shame to put you off in that cabin with Miss Gray away up here. I don't want to stick my nose in your business, old man, but—by George! —I congratulate you! I've only seen one lovelier woman in my life, and that's Peggy."

He thrust out a hand and pumped his friend's limp arm, and Aldous felt himself growing suddenly warm under the other's chuckling gaze.

"For goodness sake don't say anything, or act anything, old man," he pleaded. "I'm—just—hoping."

Blackton nodded with prodigious understanding in his eyes.

"Come along when you get through with MacDonald," he said. "I'm going in and clean up for to-night's fireworks."

A question was in Aldous' mind, but he did not put it in words. He wanted to know about Quade and Culver Rann.

"Blackton is such a ridiculously forgetful fellow at times that I don't want to rouse his alarm," he said to MacDonald as they were riding toward the corral a few minutes later. "He might let something out to Joanne and his wife, and I've got reasons—mighty good reasons, Mac—for keeping this affair as quiet as possible. We'll have to discover what Rann and Quade are doing ourselves."

MacDonald edged his horse in nearer to Aldous.

"See here, Johnny, boy—tell me what's in your mind?"

Aldous looked into the grizzled face, and there was something in the glow of the old mountaineer's eyes that made him think of a father.

"You know, Mac."

Old Donald nodded.

"Yes, I guess I do, Johnny," he said in a low voice. "You think of Mis' Joanne as I used to—to—think of *her*. I guess I know. But—what you goin' to do?"

Aldous shook his head, and for the first time that afternoon a look of uneasiness and gloom overspread his face.

"I don't know, Mac. I'm not ashamed to tell you. I love her. If she were to pass out of my life to-morrow I would ask for something that belonged to her, and the spirit of her would live in it for me until I died. That's how I care, Mac. But I've known her such a short time. I can't tell her yet. It wouldn't be the square thing. And yet she won't remain in Tête Jaune very long. Her mission is accomplished. And if—if she goes I can't very well follow her, can I, Mac?"

For a space old Donald was silent. Then he said,

"You're thinkin' of me, Johnny, an' what we was planning on?"

"Partly."

"Then don't any more. I'll stick to you, an' we'll stick to her. Only——"

"What?"

"If you could get Peggy Blackton to help you——"

"You mean——" began Aldous eagerly.

"That if Peggy Blackton got her to stay for a week—mebby ten days—visitin' her, you know, it wouldn't be so bad if you told her then, would it, Johnny?"

"By George, it wouldn't!"

"And I think——"

"Yes——"

"Bein' an old man, an' seein' mebby what you don't see——"

"Yes——"

"That she'd take you, Johnny."

In his breast John's heart seemed suddenly to give a jump that choked him. And while he stared ahead old Donald went on.

"I've seen it afore, in a pair of eyes just like her eyes, Johnny—so soft an' deeplike, like the sky up there when the sun's in it. I seen it when we was ridin' behind an' she looked ahead at you, Johnny. I did. An' I've seen it afore. An' I think——"

Aldous waited, his heart-strings ready to snap.

"An' I think—she likes you a great deal, Johnny."

Aldous reached over and gripped MacDonald's hand.

"The good Lord bless you, Donald! We'll stick! As for Quade and Culver Rann——"

"I've been thinkin' of them," interrupted MacDonald. "You haven't got time to waste on them, Johnny. Leave 'em to me. If it's only a week you've got to be close an' near by Mis' Joanne. I'll find out what Quade an' Rann are doing, and what they're goin' to do. I've got a scheme. Will you leave 'em to me?"

Aldous nodded, and in the same breath informed MacDonald of Peggy Blackton's invitation. The old hunter chuckled exultantly. He stopped his horse, and Aldous halted.

"It's workin' out fine, Johnny!" he exclaimed. "There ain't no need of you goin' any further. We understand each other, and there ain't nothin' for you to do at the corral. Jump off your horse and go back. If I want you I'll come to the Blacktons' 'r send word, and if you want me I'll be at the corral or the camp in the coulee. Jump off, Johnny!"

Without further urging Aldous dismounted. They shook hands again, and MacDonald drove on ahead of him the saddled horses and the pack. And as Aldous turned back toward the bungalow old Donald was mumbling low in his beard again, "God ha' mercy on me, but I'm doin' it for her an' Johnny—for her an' Johnny!"

CHAPTER XVII

HALF an hour later Blackton had shown Aldous to his room and bath. It was four o'clock when he rejoined the contractor in the lower room, freshly bathed and shaven and in a change of clothes. He had not seen Joanne, but half a dozen times he had heard her and Peggy Blackton laughing and talking in Mrs. Blackton's big room at the head of the stairs, and he heard them now as they sat down to smoke their cigars. Blackton was filled with enthusiasm over the accomplishment of his latest work, and Aldous tried hard not to betray the fact that the minutes were passing with gruelling slowness while he waited for Joanne. He wanted to see her. His heart was beating like an excited boy's. He could hear her footsteps over his head, and he distinguished her soft laughter, and her sweet voice when she spoke. There was something tantalizing in her nearness and the fact that she did not once show herself at the top of the stair. Blackton was still talking about "coyotes" and dynamite when, an hour later, Aldous looked up, and his heart gave a big, glad jump.

Peggy Blackton, a plump little golden-haired vision of happiness, was already half a dozen steps down the stairs. At the top Joanne, for an instant, had paused. Through that space, before the contractor had turned, her eyes met those of John Aldous. She was smiling. Her eyes were

shining at him. Never had he seen her look at him in that way, he thought, and never had she seemed such a perfect vision of loveliness. She was dressed in a soft, clinging something with a flutter of white lace at her throat, and as she came down he saw that she had arranged her hair in a marvellous way. Soft little curls half hid themselves in the shimmer of rich coils she had wreathed upon her head, and adorable little tendrils caressed the lovely flush in her cheeks, and clung to the snow-whiteness of her neck.

For a moment, as Peggy Blackton went to her husband, he stood very close to Joanne, and into his eyes she was smiling, half laughing, her beautiful mouth aquiver, her eyes glowing, the last trace of their old suspense and fear vanished in a new and wondrous beauty. He would not have said she was twenty-eight now. He would have sworn she was twenty.

"Joanne," he whispered, "you are wonderful. Your hair is glorious!"

"Always—my hair," she replied, so low that he alone heard. "Can you never see beyond my hair, John Aldous?"

"I stop there," he said. "And I marvel. It is glorious!"

"Again!" And up from her white throat there rose a richer, sweeter colour. "If you say that again now, John Aldous, I shall never make curls for you again as long as I live!"

"For me——"

His heart seemed near bursting with joy. But she had left him, and was laughing with Peggy Blackton, who was

showing her husband where he had missed a stubbly patch of beard on his cheek. He caught her eyes, turned swiftly to him, and they were laughing at him, and there came a sudden pretty upturn to her chin as he continued to stare, and he saw again the colour deepening in her face. When Peggy Blackton led her husband to the stair, and drove him up to shave off the stubbly patch, Joanne found the opportunity to whisper to him:

"You are rude, John Aldous! You must not stare at me like that!"

And as she spoke the rebellious colour was still in her face, in spite of the tantalizing curve of her red lips and the sparkle in her eyes.

"I can't help it," he pleaded. "You are—glorious!"

During the next hour, and while they were at supper, he could see that she was purposely avoiding his eyes, and that she spoke oftener to Paul Blackton than she did to him, apparently taking the keenest interest in his friend's enthusiastic descriptions of the mighty work along the line of steel. And as pretty Peggy Blackton never seemed quite so happy as when listening to her husband, he was forced to content himself by looking at Joanne most of the time, without once receiving her smile.

The sun was just falling behind the western mountains when Peggy and Joanne, hurried most incontinently by Blackton, who had looked at his watch 'eft the table to prepare themselves for the big event of the evening.

"I want to get you there before dusk," he explained. "So please hurry!"

They were back in five minutes. Joanne had slipped on a long gray coat, and with a veil that trailed a yard down

her back she had covered her head. Not a curl or a tress of her hair had she left out of its filmy prison, and there was a mischievous gleam of triumph in her eyes when she looked at Aldous.

A moment later, when they went ahead of Blackton and his wife to where the buckboard was waiting for them, he said:

"You put on that veil to punish me, Ladygray?"

"It is a pretty veil," said she.

"But your hair is prettier," said he.

"And you embarrassed me very much by staring as you did, John Aldous!"

"Forgive me. It is—I mean you are—so beautiful."

"And you are sometimes—most displeasing," said she. "Your ingenuousness, John Aldous, is shocking!"

"Forgive me," he said again.

"And you have known me but two days," she added.

"Two days—is a long time," he argued. "One can be born, and live, and die in two days. Besides, our trails have crossed for years."

"But—it displeases me."

"What I have said?"

"Yes."

"And the way I have looked at you?"

"Yes."

Her voice was low and quiet now, her eyes were serious, and she was not smiling.

"I know—I know," he groaned, and there was a deep thrill in his voice. "It's been only two days after all, Ladygray. It seems like—like a lifetime. I don't want you to think badly of me. God knows I don't!"

"No, no. I don't," she said quickly and gently. "You are the finest gentleman I ever knew, John Aldous. Only —it embarrasses me."

"I will cut out my tongue and put out my eyes——"

"Nothing so terrible," she laughed softly. "Will you help me into the wagon? They are coming."

She gave him her hand, warm and soft; and Blackton forced him into the seat between her and Peggy, and Joanne's hand rested in his arm all the way to the mountain that was to be blown up, and he told himself that he was a fool if he were not supremely happy. The wagon stopped, and he helped her out again, her warm little hand again close in his own, and when she looked at him he was the cool, smiling John Aldous of old, so cool, and strong, and unemotional that he saw surprise in her eyes first, and then that gentle, gathering glow that came when she was proud of him, and pleased with him. And as Blackton pointed out the mountain she unknotted the veil under her chin and let it drop back over her shoulders, so that the last light of the day fell richly in the trembling curls and thick coils of her hair.

"And that is my reward," said John Aldous, but he whispered it to himself.

They had stopped close to a huge flat rock, and on this rock men were at work fitting wires to a little boxlike thing that had a white button-lever. Paul Blackton pointed to this, and his face was flushed with excitement.

"That's the little thing that's going to blow it up, Miss Gray—the touch of your finger on that little white button. Do you see that black base of the mountain yonder?—right there where you can see men moving about? It's

half a mile from here, and the 'coyote' is there, dug into the wall of it."

The tremble of enthusiasm was in his voice as he went on, pointing with his long arm: "Think of it! We're spending a hundred thousand dollars going through that rock that people who travel on the Grand Trunk Pacific in the future will be saved seven minutes in their journey from coast to coast! We're spending a hundred thousand there, and millions along the line, that we may have the smoothest roadbed in the world when we're done, and the quickest route from sea to sea. It looks like waste, but it isn't. It's science! It's the fight of competition! It's the determination behind the forces—the determination to make this road the greatest road in the world! Listen!"

The gloom was thickening swiftly. The black mountain was fading slowly away, and up out of that gloom came now ghostly and far-reaching voices of men booming faintly through giant megaphones.

"*Clear away! Clear away! Clear away!*" they said, and the valley and the mountain-sides caught up the echoes, until it seemed that a hundred voices were crying out the warning. Then fell a strange and weird silence, and the echoes faded away like the voices of dying men, and all was still save the far-away barking of a coyote that answered the mysterious challenges of the night. Joanne was close to the rock. Quietly the men who had been working on the battery drew back.

"It is ready!" said one.

"Wait!" said Blackton, as his wife went to speak. "Listen!"

For five minutes there was silence. Then out of the night a single megaphone cried the word:

"*Fire!*"

"All is clear," said the engineer, with a deep breath. "All you have to do, Miss Gray, is to move that little lever from the side on which it now rests to the opposite side. Are you ready?"

In the darkness Joanne's left hand had sought John's. It clung to his tightly. He could feel a little shiver run through her.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Then—if you please—press the button!"

Slowly Joanne's right hand crept out, while the fingers of her left clung tighter to Aldous. She touched the button—thrust it over. A little cry that fell from between her tense lips told them she had done the work, and a silence like that of death fell on those who waited.

A half a minute—perhaps three quarters—and a shiver ran under their feet, but there was no sound; and then a black pall, darker than the night, seemed to rise up out of the mountain, and with that, a second later, came the explosion. There was a rumbling and a jarring, as if the earth were convulsed under foot; volumes of dense black smoke shot upward, and in another instant these rolling, twisting volumes of black became lurid, and an explosion like that of a thousand great guns rent the air. As fast as the eye could follow sheets of flame shot up out of the sea of smoke, climbing higher and higher, in lightning flashes, until the lurid tongues licked the air a quarter of a mile above the startled wilderness. Explosion followed explosion, some of them coming in hollow, reverberating

booms, others sounding as if in mid-air. Unseen by the watchers, the heavens were filled with hurtling rocks; solid masses of granite ten feet square were thrown a hundred feet away; rocks weighing a ton were hurled still farther, as if they were no more than stones flung by the hands of a giant; chunks that would have crashed from the roof to the basement of a skyscraper dropped a third of a mile away. For three minutes the frightful convulsions continued, and the tongues of flame leaped into the night. Then the lurid lights died out, shorter and shorter grew the sullen flashes, and then again fell—silence!

During those appalling moments, unconscious of the act, Joanne had shrank close to Aldous, so that he felt the soft crush of her hair and the swift movement of her bosom. Blackton's voice brought them back to life.

He laughed, and it was the laugh of a man who had looked upon work well done.

"It has done the trick," he said. "To-morrow we will come and see. And I have changed my plans about Coyote Number Twenty-eight. Hutchins, the superintendent, is passing through in the afternoon, and I want him to see it." He spoke now to a man who had come up out of the darkness. "Gregg, have Twenty-eight ready at four o'clock to-morrow afternoon—four o'clock—sharp!"

Then he said:

"Dust and a bad smell will soon be settling about us. Come, let's go home!"

And as they went back to the buckboard wagon through the gloom John Aldous still held Joanne's hand in his own, and she made no effort to take it from him.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE next morning, when Aldous joined the engineer in the dining-room below, he was disappointed to find the breakfast table prepared for two instead of four. It was evident that Peggy Blackton and Joanne were not going to interrupt their beauty nap on their account.

Blackton saw his friend's inquiring look, and chuckled.

"Guess we'll have to get along without 'em this morning, old man. Lord bless me, did you hear them last night —after you went to bed?"

"No."

"You were too far away," chuckled Blackton again. "I was in the room across the hall from them. You see, old man, Peggy sometimes gets fairly starved for the right sort of company up here, and last night they didn't go to bed until after twelve o'clock. I looked at my watch. Mebby they were in bed, but I could hear 'em buzzing like two bees, and every little while they'd giggle, and then go on buzzing again. By George, there wasn't a break in it! When one let up the other'd begin, and sometimes I guess they were both going at once. Consequently, they're sleeping now."

When breakfast was finished Blackton looked at his watch.

"Seven o'clock," he said. "We'll leave word for the

girls to be ready at nine. What are you going to do meantime, Aldous?"

"Hunt up MacDonald, probably."

"And I'll run down and take a look at the work."

As they left the house the engineer nodded down the road. MacDonald was coming.

"He has saved you the trouble," he said. "Remember, Aldous—nine o'clock sharp!"

A moment later Aldous was advancing to meet the old mountaineer.

"They've gone, Johnny," was Donald's first greeting.

"Gone?"

"Yes. The whole bunch—Quade, Culver Rann, DeBar, and the woman who rode the bear. They've gone, hide and hair, and nobody seems to know where."

Aldous was staring.

"Also," resumed old Donald slowly, "Culver Rann's outfit is gone—twenty horses, including six saddles. An' likewise others have gone, but I can't find out who."

"Gone!" repeated Aldous again.

MacDonald nodded.

"And that means——"

"That Culver Rann ain't lost any time in gettin' under way for the gold," said Donald. "DeBar is with him, an' probably the woman. Likewise three cut-throats to fill the other saddles. They've gone prepared to fight."

"And Quade?"

Old Donald hunched his shoulders, and suddenly John's face grew dark and hard.

"I understand," he spoke, half under his breath. "Quade has disappeared—but he isn't with Culver Rann.

He wants us to believe he has gone. He wants to throw us off our guard. But he's watching, and waiting—somewhere—like a hawk, to swoop down on Joanne! He——"

"That's it!" broke in MacDonald hoarsely. "That's it, Johnny! It's his old trick—his old trick with women. There's a hunderd men who've got to do his bidding—do it 'r get out of the mountains—an' we've got to watch Joanne. We have, Johnny! If she should disappear——"

Aldous waited.

"You'd never find her again, so 'elp me God, you wouldn't, Johnny!" he finished.

"We'll watch her," said Aldous quietly. "I'll be with her to-day, Mac, and to-night I'll come down to the camp in the coulee to compare notes with you. They can't very well steal her out of Blackton's house while I'm gone."

For an hour after MacDonald left him he walked about in the neighbourhood of the Blackton bungalow smoking his pipe. Not until he saw the contractor drive up in the buckboard did he return. Joanne and Peggy were more than prompt. They were waiting. If such a thing were possible Joanne was more radiantly lovely than the night before. To Aldous she became more beautiful every time he looked at her. But this morning he did not speak what was in his heart when, for a moment, he held her hand, and looked into her eyes. Instead, he said:

"Good morning, Ladygray. Have you used——"

"I have," she smiled. "Only it's Potterdam's Tar Soap, and not the other. And you—have not shaved, John Aldous!"

"Great Scott, so I haven't!" he exclaimed, rubbing his chin. "But I did yesterday afternoon, Ladygray!"

"And you will again this afternoon, if you please," she commanded. "I don't like bristles."

"But in the wilderness——"

"One can shave as well as another can make curls," she reminded him, and there came an adorable little dimple at the corner of her mouth as she looked toward Paul Blackton.

Aldous was glad that Paul and Peggy Blackton did most of the talking that morning. They spent half an hour where the explosion of the night before had blown out the side of the mountain, and then drove on to Coyote Number Twenty-eight. It was in the face of a sandstone cliff, and all they could see of it when they got out of the wagon was a dark hole in the wall of rock. Not a soul was about, and Blackton rubbed his hands with satisfaction.

"Everything is completed," he said. "Gregg put in the last packing this morning, and all we are waiting for now is four o'clock this afternoon."

The hole in the mountain was perhaps four feet square. Ten feet in front of it the engineer paused, and pointed to the ground. Up out of the earth came two wires, which led away from the mouth of the cavern.

"Those wires go down to the explosives," he explained. "They're battery wires half a mile long. But we don't attach the battery until the final moment, as you saw last night. There might be an accident."

He bent his tall body and entered the mouth of the cavern, leading his wife by the hand. Observing that Joanne had seen this attention on the contractor's part, Aldous held out his own hand, and Joanne accepted it. For perhaps twenty feet they followed the Blacktons with

lowered heads. They seemed to have entered a black, cold pit, sloping slightly downward, and only faintly could they see Blackton when he straightened.

His voice came strange and sepulchral:

"You can stand up now. We're in the chamber. Don't move or you might stumble over something. There ought to be a lantern here."

He struck a match, and as he moved slowly toward a wall of blackness, searching for the lantern, he called back encouragingly through the gloom:

"You folks are now standing right over ten tons of dynamite, and there's another five tons of black powder——"

A little shriek from Peggy Blackton stopped him, and his match went out.

"What in heaven's name is the matter?" he asked anxiously. "Peggy——"

"Why in heaven's name do you light a match then, with us standing over all those tons of dynamite?" demanded Peggy. "Paul Blackton, you're——"

The engineer's laughter was like a giant's roar in the cavern, and Joanne gave a gasp, while Peggy shiveringly caught Aldous by the arm.

"There—I've got the lantern!" exclaimed Blackton. "There isn't any danger, not a bit. Wait a minute and I'll tell you all about it." He lighted the lantern, and in the glow of it Joanne's and Peggy's faces were white and startled. "Why, bless my soul, I didn't mean to frighten you!" he cried. "I was just telling you facts. See, we're standing on a solid floor—four feet of packed rock and cement. The dynamite and black powder are under

that. We're in a chamber—a cave—an artificial cavern. It's forty feet deep, twenty wide, and about seven high."

He held the lantern even with his shoulders and walked deeper into the cavern as he spoke. The others followed. They passed a keg on which was a half-burned candle. Close to the keg was an empty box. Beyond these things the cavern was empty.

"I thought it was full of powder and dynamite," apologized Peggy.

"You see, it's like this," Blackton began. "We put the powder and dynamite down there, and pack it over solid with rock and cement. If we didn't leave this big air-chamber above it there would be only one explosion, and probably two thirds of the explosive would not fire, and would be lost. This chamber corrects that. You heard a dozen explosions last night, and you'll hear a dozen this afternoon, and the biggest explosion of all is usually the fourth or fifth. A 'coyote' isn't like an ordinary blast or shot. It's a mighty expensive thing, and you see it means a lot of work. Now, if some one were to touch off those explosives at this minute—— What's the matter, Peggy? Are you cold? You're shivering!"

"Ye-e-e-e-s!" chattered Peggy.

Aldous felt Joanne tugging at his hand.

"Let's take Mrs. Blackton out," she whispered. "I'm—I'm—afraid she'll take cold!"

In spite of himself Aldous could not restrain his laughter until they had got through the tunnel. Out in the sunlight he looked at Joanne, still holding her hand. She withdrew it, looking at him accusingly.

"Lord bless me!" exclaimed Blackton, who seemed to understand at last. "There's no danger—not a bit!"

"But I'd rather look at it from outside, Paul, dear," said Mrs. Blackton.

"But—Peggy—if it went off now you'd be in just as bad shape out here!"

"I don't think we'd be quite so messy, really I don't, dear," she persisted.

"Lord bless me!" he gasped.

"And they'd probably be able to find something of us," she added.

"Not a button, Peggy!"

"Then I'm going to move, if you please!" And suiting her action to the word Peggy led the way to the buckboard. There she paused and took one of her husband's big hands fondly in both her own. "It's perfectly wonderful, Paul—and I'm proud of you!" she said. "But, honestly, dear, I can enjoy it so much better at four o'clock this afternoon."

Smiling, Blackton lifted her into the buckboard.

"That's why I wish Paul had been a preacher or something like that," she confided to Joanne as they drove homeward. "I'm growing old just thinking of him working over that horrid dynamite and powder all the time. Every little while some one is blown into nothing."

"I believe," said Joanne, "that I'd like to do something like that if I were a man. I'd want to be a man, not that preachers aren't men, Peggy, dear—but I'd want to do things, like blowing up mountains for instance, or finding buried cities, or"—she whispered, very, very softly under her breath—"writing books, John Aldous!"

Only Aldous heard those last words, and Joanne gave a sharp little cry; and when Peggy asked her what the matter was Joanne did not tell her that John Aldous had almost broken her hand on the opposite side—for Joanne was riding between the two.

"It's lame for life," she said to him half an hour later, when he was bidding her good-bye, preparatory to accompanying Blackton down to the working steel. "And I deserve it for trying to be kind to you. I think some writers of books are—are perfectly intolerable!"

"Won't you take a little walk with me right after dinner?" he was asking for the twentieth time.

"I doubt it very, very much."

"Please, Ladygray!"

"I may possibly think about it."

With that she left him, and she did not look back as she and Peggy Blackton went into the house. But as they drove away they saw two faces at the window that overlooked the townward road, and two hands were waving good-bye. Both could not be Peggy Blackton's hands.

"Joanne and I are going for a walk this afternoon, Blackton," said Aldous, "and I just want to tell you not to worry if we're not back by four o'clock. Don't wait for us. We may be watching the blow-up from the top of some mountain."

Blackton chuckled.

"Don't blame you," he said. "From an observer's point of view, John, it looks to me as though you were going to have something more than hope to live on pretty soon!"

"I—I hope so."

"And when I was going with Peggy I wouldn't have traded a quiet little walk with her—like this you're suggesting—for a front seat look at a blow-up of the whole Rocky Mountain system!"

"And you won't forget to tell Mrs. Blackton that we may not return by four o'clock?"

"I will not. And"—Blackton puffed hard at his pipe—"and, John—the Tête Jaune preacher is our nearest neighbour," he finished.

From then until dinner time John Aldous lived in an atmosphere that was not quite real, but a little like a dream. His hopes and his happiness were at their highest. He knew that Joanne would go walking with him that afternoon, and in spite of his most serious efforts to argue to the contrary he could not keep down the feeling that the event would mean a great deal for him. Almost feverishly he interested himself in Paul Blackton's work. When they returned to the bungalow, a little before noon, he went to his room, shaved himself, and in other ways prepared for dinner.

Joanne and the Blacktons were waiting when he came down.

His first look at Joanne assured him. She was dressed in a soft gray walking-suit. Never had the preparation of a dinner seemed so slow to him, and a dozen times he found himself inwardly swearing at Tom, the Chinese cook. It was one o'clock before they sat down at the table and it was two o'clock when they arose. It was a quarter after two when Joanne and he left the bungalow.

"Shall we wander up on the mountain?" he asked. "It would be fine to look down upon the explosion."

"I have noticed that in some things you are very observant," said Joanne, ignoring his question. "In the matter of curls, for instance, you are unapproachable; in others you are—quite blind, John Aldous!"

"What do you mean?" he asked, bewildered.

"I lost my scarf this morning, and you did not notice it. It is quite an unusual scarf. I bought it in Cairo, and I don't want to have it blown up."

"You mean——"

"Yes. I must have dropped it in the cavern. I had it when we entered."

"Then we'll return for it," he volunteered. "We'll still have plenty of time to climb up the mountain before the explosion."

Twenty minutes later they came to the dark mouth of the tunnel. There was no one in sight, and for a moment Aldous searched for matches in his pocket.

"Wait here," he said. "I won't be gone two minutes."

He entered, and when he came to the chamber he struck a match. The lantern was on the empty box. He lighted it, and began looking for the scarf. Suddenly he heard a sound. He turned, and saw Joanne standing in the glow of the lantern.

"Can you find it?" she asked.

"I haven't—yet."

They bent over the rock floor, and in a moment Joanne gave a little exclamation of pleasure as she caught up the scarf. In that same moment, as they straightened and faced each other, John Aldous felt his heart cease beating, and Joanne's face had gone as white as death. The rock-walled chamber was atremble; they heard a

sullen, distant roaring, and as Aldous caught Joanne's hand and sprang toward the tunnel the roar grew into a deafening crash, and a gale of wind rushed into their faces, blowing out the lantern, and leaving them in darkness. The mountain seemed crumbling about them, and above the sound of it rang out a wild, despairing cry from Joanne's lips. For there was no longer the brightness of sunshine at the end of the tunnel, but darkness—utter darkness; and through that tunnel there came a deluge of dust and rock that flung them back into the blackness of the pit, and separated them.

"John—John Aldous!"

"I am here, Joanne! I will light the lantern!"

His groping hands found the lantern. He relighted it, and Joanne crept to his side, her face as white as the face of the dead. He held the lantern above him, and together they stared at where the tunnel had been. A mass of rock met their eyes. The tunnel was choked. And then, slowly, each turned to the other; and each knew that the other understood—for it was Death that whispered about them now in the restless air of the rock-walled tomb, a terrible death, and their lips spoke no words as their eyes met in that fearful and silent understanding.

CHAPTER XIX

JOANNE'S white lips spoke first.

"The tunnel is closed!" she whispered.

Her voice was strange. It was not Joanne's voice. It was unreal, terrible, and her eyes were terrible as they looked steadily into his. Aldous could not answer; something had thickened in his throat, and his blood ran cold as he stared into Joanne's dead-white face and saw the understanding in her eyes. For a space he could not move, and then, as suddenly as it had fallen upon him, the effect of the shock passed away.

He smiled, and put out a hand to her.

"A slide of rock has fallen over the mouth of the tunnel," he said, forcing himself to speak as if it meant little or nothing. "Hold the lantern, Joanne, while I get busy."

"A slide of rock," she repeated after him dumbly.

She took the lantern, her eyes still looking at him in that stricken way, and with his naked hands John Aldous set to work. Five minutes and he knew that it was madness to continue. Hands alone could not clear the tunnel. And yet he worked, tearing into the rock and shale like an animal; rolling back small boulders, straining at larger ones until the tendons of his arms seemed ready to snap and his veins to burst. For a few minutes after that he went mad. His muscles cracked, he panted as he fought with the rock until his hands were torn and bleeding, and

over and over again there ran through his head Blackton's last words—*Four o'clock this afternoon!—Four o'clock this afternoon!*

Then he came to what he knew he would reach very soon, a solid wall! Rock and shale and earth were packed as if by battering rams. For a few moments he fought to control himself before facing Joanne. Over him swept the grim realization that his last fight must be for her. He steadied himself, and wiped the dust and grime from his face with his handkerchief. For the last time he swallowed hard. His soul rose within him almost joyously now in the face of this last great fight, and he turned—John Aldous, the super-man. There was no trace of fear in his face as he went to her. He was even smiling in that ghostly glow of the lantern.

"It is hard work, Joanne."

She did not seem to hear what he had said. She was looking at his hands. She held the lantern nearer.

"Your hands are bleeding, John!"

It was the first time she had spoken his name like that, and he was thrilled by the calmness of her voice, the untrembling gentleness of her hand as it touched his hand. From his bruised and bleeding flesh she raised her eyes to him, and they were no longer the dumb, horrified eyes he had gazed into fifteen minutes before. In the wonder of it he stood silent, and the moment was weighted with an appalling silence.

It came to them both in that instant—the *tick-tick-tick* of the watch in his pocket!

Without taking her eyes from his face she asked:

"What time is it, John?"

"Joanne——"

"I am not afraid," she whispered. "I was afraid this afternoon, but I am not afraid now. What time is it, John?"

"My God—they'll dig us out!" he cried wildly. "Joanne, you don't think they won't dig us out, do you? Why, that's impossible! The slide has covered the wires. They've got to dig us out! There is no danger—none at all. Only it's chilly, and uncomfortable, and I'm afraid you'll take cold!"

"What time is it?" she repeated softly.

For a moment he looked steadily at her, and his heart leaped when he saw that she must believe him, for though her face was as white as an ivory cross she was smiling at him—yes! she was smiling at him in that gray and ghastly death-gloom of the cavern!

He brought out his watch, and in the lantern-glow they looked at it.

"A quarter after three," he said. "By four o'clock they will be at work—Blackton and twenty men. They will have us out in time for supper."

"A quarter after three," repeated Joanne, and the words came steadily from her lips. "That means——"

He waited.

"*We have forty-five minutes in which to live!*" she said.

Before he could speak she had thrust the lantern into his hand, and had seized his other hand in both her own.

"If there are only forty-five minutes let us not lie to one another," she said, and her voice was very close. "I know why you are doing it, John Aldous. It is for me. You have done a great deal for me in these two days in which

"The tunnel is closed," she whispered. . . . "That means we have just forty-five minutes to live. . . . Let us not lie to one another."

one 'can be born, and live, and die.' But in these last minutes I do not want you to act what I know cannot be the truth. You know—and I know. The wires are laid to the battery rock. There is no hope. At four o'clock—we both know what will happen. And I—am not afraid."

She heard him choking for speech. In a moment he said:

"There are other lanterns—Joanne. I saw them when I was looking for the scarf. I will light them."

He found two lanterns hanging against the rock wall. He lighted them, and the half-burned candle.

"It is pleasanter," she said.

She stood in the glow of them when he turned to her, tall, and straight, and as beautiful as an angel. Her lips were pale; the last drop of blood had ebbed from her face; but there was something glorious in the poise of her head, and in the wistful gentleness of her mouth and the light in her eyes. And then, slowly, as he stood looking with a face torn in its agony for her, she held out her arms.

"John—John Aldous——"

"Joanne! Oh, my God!—Joanne!"

She swayed as he sprang to her, but she was smiling—smiling in that new and wonderful way as her arms reached out to him, and the words he heard her say came low and sobbing:

"John—John, if you want to, now—you can tell me that my hair is beautiful!"

And then she was in his arms, her warm, sweet body crushed close to him, her face lifted to him, her soft hands stroking his face, and over and over again she was speaking his name while from out of his soul there rushed forth the

mighty flood of his great love; and he held her there, forgetful of time now, forgetful of death itself; and he kissed her tender lips, her hair, her eyes—conscious only that in the hour of death he had found life, that her hands were stroking his face, and caressing his hair, and that over and over again she was whispering sobbingly his name, and that she loved him. The pressure of her hands against his breast at last made him free her. And now, truly, she was glorious. For the triumph of love had overridden the despair of death, and her face was flooded with its colour and in her eyes was its glory.

And then, as they stood there, a step between them, there came—almost like the benediction of a cathedral bell—the soft, low tinkling chime of the half-hour bell in Aldous' watch!

It struck him like a blow. Every muscle in him became like rigid iron, and his torn hands clenched tightly at his sides.

"Joanne—Joanne, it is impossible!" he cried huskily, and he had her close in his arms again, even as her face was whitening in the lantern-glow. "I have lived for you, I have waited for you—all these years you have been coming, coming, coming to me—and now that you are mine—*mine*—it is impossible! It cannot happen——"

He freed her again, and caught up a lantern. Foot by foot he examined the packed tunnel. It was solid—not a crevice or a break through which might have travelled the sound of his voice or the explosion of a gun. He did not shout. He knew that it would be hopeless, and that his voice would be terrifying in that sepulchral tomb. Was it possible that there might be some other opening—a

possible exit—in that mountain wall? With the lantern in his hand he searched. There was no break. He came back to Joanne. She was standing where he had left her. And suddenly, as he looked at her, all fear went out of him, and he put down the lantern and went to her.

"Joanne," he whispered, holding her two hands against his breast, "you are not afraid?"

"No, I am not afraid."

"And you know——"

"Yes, I know," and she leaned forward so that her head lay partly against their clasped hands and partly upon his breast.

"And you love me, Joanne?"

"As I never dreamed that I should love a man, John Aldous," she whispered.

"And yet it has been but two days——"

"And I have lived an eternity," he heard her lips speak softly.

"You would be my wife?"

"Yes."

"To-morrow?"

"If you wanted me then, John."

"I thank God," he breathed in her hair. "And you would come to me without reservation, Joanne, trusting me, believing in me—you would come to me body, and heart, and soul?"

"In all those ways—yes."

"I thank God," he breathed again.

He raised her face. He looked deep into her eyes, and the glory of her love grew in them, and her lips trembled as she lifted them ever so little for him to kiss.

"Oh, I was happy—so happy," she whispered, putting her hands to his face. "John, I knew that you loved me, and oh! I was fighting so hard to keep myself from letting you know how happy it made me. And here, I was afraid you wouldn't tell me—before it happened. And John—John——"

She leaned back from him, and her white hands moved like swift shadows in her hair, and then, suddenly, it billowed about her—her glorious hair—covering her from crown to hip; and with her hands she swept and piled the lustrous masses of it over him until his face, and head, and shoulders were buried in the flaming sheen and sweet perfume of it.

He strained her closer. Through the warm richness of her tresses his lips pressed her lips, and they ceased to breathe. And up to their ears, pounding through that enveloping shroud of her hair came the *tick-tick-tick* of the watch in his pocket.

"Joanne," he whispered.

"Yes, John."

"You are not afraid of—death?"

"No, not when you are holding me like this, John."

He still clasped her hands, and a sweet smile crept over her lips.

"Even now you are splendid," she said. "Oh, I would have you that way, my John!"

Again they stood up in the unsteady glow of the lanterns.

"What time is it?" she asked.

He drew out his watch, and as they both looked his blood ran cold.

"Twelve minutes," she murmured, and there was not a

quiver in her voice. "Let us sit down, John—you on this box, and I on the floor, at your feet—like this."

He seated himself on the box, and Joanne nestled herself at his knees, her hands clasped in his.

"I think, John," she said softly, "that very, very often we would have visited like this—you and I—in the evening."

A lump choked him, and he could not answer.

"I would very often have come and perched myself at your feet like this."

"Yes, yes, my beloved."

"And you would always have told me how beautiful my hair was—always. You would not have forgotten that, John—or have grown tired?"

"No, no—never!"

His arms were about her. He was drawing her closer.

"And we would have had beautiful times together, John—writing, and going adventuring, and—and——"

He felt her trembling, throbbing, and her arms tightened about him.

And now, again up through the smother of her hair, came the *tick-tick-tick* of his watch.

He felt her fumbling at his watch pocket, and in a moment she was holding the timepiece between them, so that the light of the lantern fell on the face of it.

"It is three minutes of four, John."

The watch slipped from her fingers, and now she drew herself up so that her arms were about his neck, and their faces touched.

"Dear John, you love me?"

"So much that even now, in the face of death, I am

happy," he whispered. "Joanne, sweetheart, we are not going to be separated. We are going—together. Through all eternity it must be like this—you and I, together. Little girl, wind your hair about me—tight!"

"There—and there—and there, John! I have tied you to me, and you are buried in it! Kiss me, John——"

And then the wild and terrible fear of a great loneliness swept through him. For Joanne's voice had died away in a whispering breath, and the lips he kissed did not kiss him back, and her body lay heavy, heavy, heavy in his arms. Yet in his loneliness he thanked God for bringing her oblivion in these last moments, and with his face crushed to hers he waited. For he knew that it was no longer a matter of minutes, but of seconds, and in those seconds he prayed, until up through the warm smother of her hair—with the clearness of a tolling bell—came the sound of the little gong in his watch striking the Hour of Four!

In space other worlds might have crumbled into ruin; on earth the stories of empires might have been written and the lives of men grown old in those first century-long seconds in which John Aldous held his breath and waited after the chiming of the hour-bell in the watch on the cavern floor. How long he waited he did not know; how closely he was crushing Joanne to his breast he did not realize. Seconds, minutes, and other minutes—and his brain ran red in dumb, silent madness. And the watch! It *ticked, ticked, ticked!* It was like a hammer.

He had heard the sound of it first coming up through her hair. But it was not in her hair now. It was over him, about him—it was no longer a ticking, but a throb, a steady,

jarring, beating throb. It grew louder, and the air stirred with it. He lifted his head. With the eyes of a madman he stared—and listened. His arms relaxed from about Joanne, and she slipped crumpled and lifeless to the floor. He stared—and that steady *beat-beat-beat*—a hundred times louder than the ticking of a watch—pounded in his brain. Was he mad? He staggered to the choked mouth of the tunnel, and then there fell shout upon shout, and shriek upon shriek from his lips, and twice, like a madman now, he ran back to Joanne and caught her up in his arms, calling and sobbing her name, and then shouting—and calling her name again. She moved; her eyes opened, and like one gazing upon the spirit of the dead she looked into the face of John Aldous, a madman's face in the lantern-glow.

"John—John——"

She put up her hands, and with a cry he ran with her in his arms to the choked tunnel.

"Listen! Listen!" he cried wildly. "Dear God in Heaven, Joanne—can you not hear them? It's Blackton—Blackton and his men! Hear—hear the rock-hammers smashing! Joanne—Joanne—we are saved!"

She did not sense him. She swayed, half on her feet, half in his arms, as consciousness and reason returned to her. Dazedly her hands went to his face in their old, sweet way. Aldous saw her struggling to understand—to comprehend; and he kissed her soft upturned lips, fighting back the excitement that made him want to raise his voice again in wild and joyous shouting.

"It is Blackton!" he said over and over again. "It is Blackton and his men! Listen!—you can hear their picks and the pounding of their rock-hammers!"

CHAPTER XX

AT LAST Joanne realized that the explosion was not to come, that Blackton and his men were working to save them. And now, as she listened with him, her breath began to come in sobbing excitement between her lips—for there was no mistaking that sound, that steady *beat-beat-beat* that came from beyond the cavern wall and seemed to set strange tremors stirring in the air about their ears. For a few moments they stood stunned and silent, as if not yet quite fully comprehending that they had come from out of the pit of death, and that men were fighting for their rescue. They asked themselves no questions—why the "coyote" had not been fired? how those outside knew they were in the cavern. And, as they listened, there came to them a voice. It was faint, so faint that it seemed to whisper to them through miles and miles of space—yet they knew that it was a voice!

"Some one is shouting," spoke Aldous tensely. "Joanne, my darling, stand around the face of the wall so flying rock will not strike you and I will answer with my pistol!"

When he had placed her in safety from split lead and rock chips, he drew his automatic and fired it close up against the choked tunnel. He fired five times, steadily, counting three between each shot, and then he placed his ear to the mass of stone and earth and listened. Joanne slipped to him like a shadow. Her hand sought his, and

they held their breaths. They no longer heard sounds—nothing but the crumbling and falling of dust and pebbles where the bullets had struck, and their own heart-beats. The picks and rock-hammers had ceased.

Tighter and tighter grew the clasp of Joanne's fingers, and a terrible thought flashed into John's brain. Perhaps a rock from the slide had cut a wire, and they had found the wire—had repaired it! Was that thought in Joanne's mind, too? Her finger-nails pricked his flesh. He looked at her. Her eyes were closed, and her lips were tense and gray. And then her eyes shot open—wide and staring. They heard, faintly though it came to them—once, twice, three times, four, five—the firing of a gun!

John Aldous straightened, and a great breath fell from his lips.

"Five times!" he said. "It is an answer. There is no longer doubt."

He was holding out his arms to her, and she came into them with a choking cry; and now she sobbed like a little child with her head against his breast, and for many minutes he held her close, kissing her wet face, and her damp hair, and her quivering lips, while the beat of the picks and the crash of the rock-hammers came steadily nearer.

Where those picks and rock-hammers fell a score of men were working like fiends: Blackton, his arms stripped to the shoulders; Gregg, sweating and urging the men; and among them—lifting and tearing at the rock like a madman—old Donald MacDonald, his shirt open, his great hands bleeding, his hair and beard tossing about him in the wind. Behind them, her hands clasped to her breast—

crying out to them to hurry, *hurry*—stood Peggy Blackton. The strength of five men was in every pair of arms. Huge boulders were rolled back. Men pawed earth and shale with their naked hands. Rock-hammers fell with blows that would have cracked the heart of a granite obelisk. Half an hour—three quarters—and Blackton came back to where Peggy was standing, his face black and grimed, his arms red-seared where the edges of the rocks had caught them, his eyes shining.

"We're almost there, Peggy," he panted. "Another five minutes and——"

A shout interrupted him. A cloud of dust rolled out of the mouth of the tunnel, and into that dust rushed half a dozen men led by old Donald. Before the dust had settled they began to reappear, and with a shrill scream Peggy Blackton darted forward and flung her arms about the gold-shrouded figure of Joanne, swaying and laughing and sobbing in the sunshine. And old Donald, clasping his great arms about Aldous, cried brokenly:

"Oh, Johnny, Johnny—something told me to foller ye —an' I was just in time—just in time to see you go into the coyote!"

"God bless you, Mac!" said Aldous, and then Paul Blackton was wringing his hands; and one after another the others shook his hand, but Peggy Blackton was crying like a baby as she hugged Joanne in her arms.

"MacDonald came just in time," explained Blackton a moment later; and he tried to speak steadily, and tried to smile. "Ten minutes more, and——"

He was white.

"Now that it has turned out like this I thank God that

it happened, Paul," said Aldous, for the engineer's ears alone. "We thought we were facing death, and so—I told her. And in there, on our knees, we pledged ourselves man and wife. I want the minister—as quick as you can get him, Blackton. Don't say anything to Joanne, but bring him to the house right away, will you?"

"Within half an hour," replied Blackton. "There comes Tony with the buckboard. We'll hustle up to the house and I'll have the preacher there in a jiffy."

As they went to the wagon, Aldous looked about for MacDonald. He had disappeared. Requesting Gregg to hunt him up and send him to the bungalow, he climbed into the back seat, with Joanne between him and Peggy. Her little hand lay in his. Her fingers clung to him. But her hair hid her face, and on the other side of her Peggy Blackton was laughing and talking and crying by turns.

As they entered the bungalow, Aldous whispered to Joanne:

"Will you please go right to your room, dear? I want to say something to you—alone."

When she went up the stair, Peggy caught a signal from her husband. Aldous remained with them. In two minutes he told the bewildered and finally delighted Peggy what was going to happen, and as Blackton hustled out for the minister's house he followed Joanne. She had fastened her door behind her. He knocked. Slowly she opened it.

"John——"

"I have told them, dear," he whispered happily. "They understand. And, Joanne, Paul Blackton will be back in ten minutes—with the minister. Are you glad?"

She had opened the door wide, and he was holding out his arms to her again. For a moment she did not move, but stood there trembling a little, and deeper and sweeter grew the colour in her face, and tenderer the look in her eyes.

"I must brush my hair," she answered, as though she could think of no other words. "I—I must dress."

Laughing joyously, he went to her and gathered the soft masses of her hair in his hands, and piled it up in a glorious disarray about her face and head, holding it there, and still laughing into her eyes.

"Joanne, you are mine!"

"Unless I have been dreaming—I am, John Aldous!"

"Forever and forever."

"Yes, forever—and ever."

"And because I want the whole world to know, we are going to be married by a minister."

She was silent.

"And as my wife to be," he went on, his voice trembling with his happiness, "you must obey me!"

"I think that I shall, John."

"Then you will not brush your hair, and you will not change your dress, and you will not wash the dust from your face and that sweet little beauty-spot from the tip of your nose," he commanded, and now he drew her head close to him, so that he whispered, half in her hair: "Joanne, my darling, I want you *wholly* as you came to me there, when we thought we were going to die. It was there you promised to become my wife, and I want you as you were then—when the minister comes."

"John, I think I hear some one coming up the front steps!"

They listened. The door opened. They heard voices—Blackton's voice, Peggy's voice, and another voice—a man's voice.

Blackton's voice came up to them very distinctly.

"Mighty lucky, Peggy," he said. "Caught Mr. Wollaver just as he was passing the house. Where's——"

"Sh-h-hh!" came Peggy Blackton's sibilant whisper.

Joanne's hands had crept to John's face.

"I think," she said, "that it is the minister, John."

Her warm lips were near, and he kissed them.

"Come, Joanne. We will go down."

Hand in hand they went down the stair; and when the minister saw Joanne, covered in the tangle and glory of her hair; and when he saw John Aldous, with half-naked arms and blackened face; and when, with these things, he saw the wonderful joy shining in their eyes, he stood like one struck dumb at sight of a miracle descending out of the skies. For never had Joanne looked more beautiful than in this hour, and never had man looked more like entering into paradise than John Aldous.

Short and to the point was the little mountain minister's service, and when he had done he shook hands with them, and again he stared at them as they went back up the stair, still hand in hand. At her door they stopped. There were no words to speak now, as her heart lay against his heart, and her lips against his lips. And then, after those moments, she drew a little back, and there came suddenly that sweet, quivering, joyous play of her lips as she said:

"And now, my husband, may I dress my hair?"

"My hair," he corrected, and let her go from his arms.

Her door closed behind her. A little dizzily he turned to his room. His hand was on the knob when he heard her speak his name. She had reopened her door, and stood with something in her hand, which she was holding toward him. He went back, and she gave him a photograph.

"John, you will destroy this," she whispered. "It is his photograph—Mortimer FitzHugh's. I brought it to show to people, that it might help me in my search. Please —destroy it!"

He returned to his room and placed the photograph on his table. It was wrapped in thin paper, and suddenly there came upon him a most compelling desire to see what Mortimer FitzHugh had looked like in life. Joanne would not care. Perhaps it would be best for him to know.

He tore off the paper. And as he looked at the picture the hot blood in his veins ran cold. He stared—stared as if some wild and maddening joke was being played upon his faculties. A cry rose to his lips and broke in a gasping breath, and about him the floor, the world itself, seemed slipping away from under his feet.

For the picture he held in his hand was the picture of Culver Rann!

CHAPTER XXI

FOR a minute, perhaps longer, John Aldous stood staring at the photograph which he held in his hand. It was the picture of Culver Rann—not once did he question that fact, and not once did the thought flash upon him that this might be only an unusual and startling resemblance. It was assuredly Culver Rann! The picture dropped from his hand to the table, and he went toward the door. His first impulse was to go to Joanne. But when he reached the door he locked it, and dropped into a chair, facing the mirror in his dresser.

The reflection of his own face was a shock to him. If he was pale, the dust and grime of his fight in the cavern concealed his pallor. But the face that stared at him from out of the glass was haggard, wildly and almost grotesquely haggard, and he turned from it with a grim laugh, and set his jaws hard. He returned to the table, and bit by bit tore the photograph into thin shreds, and then piled the shreds on his ash-tray and burned them. He opened a window to let out the smoke and smell of charring paper, and the fresh, cool air of early evening struck his face. He could look off through the fading sunshine of the valley and see the mountain where Coyote Number Twenty-eight was to have done its work, and as he looked he gripped the window-sill so fiercely that the nails

of his fingers were bent and broken against the wood. And in his brain the same words kept repeating themselves over and over again. Mortimer FitzHugh was not dead. He was alive. He was Culver Rann. And Joanne—Joanne was not *his* wife; she was still the wife of Mortimer FitzHugh—of Culver Rann!

He turned again to the mirror, and there was another look in his face. It was grim, terribly grim—and smiling. There was no excitement, nothing of the passion and half-madness with which he had faced Quade and Rann the night before. He laughed softly, and his nails dug as harshly into the palms of his hands as they had dug into the sills of the window.

"You poor, drivelling, cowardly fool!" he said to his reflection. "And you dare to say—you dare to *think* that she is not your wife?"

As if in reply to his words there came a knock at the door, and from the hall Blackton called:

"Here's MacDonald, Aldous. He wants to see you."

Aldous opened the door and the old hunter entered.

"If I ain't interruptin' you, Johnny——"

"You're the one man in the world I want to see, Mac. No, I'll take that back; there's one other I want to see worse than you—Culver Rann."

The strange look in his face made old Donald stare.

"Sit down," he said, drawing two chairs close to the table. "There's something to talk about. It was a terribly close shave, wasn't it?"

"An awful close shave, Johnny. As close a shave as ever was."

Still, as if not quite understanding what he saw, old Donald was staring into John's face.

"I'm glad it happened," said Aldous, and his voice became softer. "She loves me, Mac. It all came out when we were in there, and thought we were going to die. Not ten minutes ago the minister was here, and he made us man and wife."

Words of gladness that sprang to the old man's lips were stopped by that strange, cold, tense look in the face of John Aldous.

"And in the last five minutes," continued Aldous, as quietly as before, "I have learned that Mortimer FitzHugh, her husband, is not dead. Is it very remarkable that you do not find me happy, Mac? If you had come a few minutes ago——"

"Oh, my God! Johnny! Johnny!"

MacDonald had pitched forward over the table, and now he bowed his great shaggy head in his hands, and his gaunt shoulders shook as his voice came brokenly through his beard.

"I did it, Johnny; I did it for you an' her! When I knew what it would mean for her—I *couldn't*, Johnny, I couldn't tell her the truth, 'cause I knew she loved you, an' you loved her, an' it would break her heart. I thought it would be best, an' you'd go away together, an' nobody would ever know, an' you'd be happy. I didn't lie. I didn't say anything. But Johnny—Johnny, *there weren't no bones in the grave!*"

"My God!" breathed Aldous.

"There were just some clothes," went on MacDonald huskily, "an' the watch an' the ring were on top. Johnny,

there weren't nobody ever buried there, an' I'm to blame—I'm to blame."

"And you did that for us," cried Aldous, and suddenly he reached over and gripped old Donald's hands. "It wasn't a mistake, Mac. I thank God you kept silent. If you had told her that the grave was empty, that it was a fraud, I don't know what would have happened. And now—she is *mine!* If she had seen Culver Rann, if she had discovered that this scoundrel, this blackmailer and murderer, was Mortimer FitzHugh, her husband——"

"Johnny! John Aldous!"

Donald MacDonald's voice came now like the deep growling roar of a she-bear, and as he cried the other's name he sprang to his feet, and his eyes gleamed in their deep sockets like raging fires.

"Johnny!"

Aldous rose, and he was smiling. He nodded.

"That's it," he said. "Mortimer FitzHugh is Culver Rann!"

"An'—an' you know this?"

"Absolutely. Joanne gave me Mortimer FitzHugh's photograph to destroy. I am sorry that I burned it before you saw it. But there is no doubt. Mortimer FitzHugh and Culver Rann are the same man."

Slowly the old mountaineer turned to the door. Aldous was ahead of him, and stood with his hand on the knob.

"I don't want you to go yet, Mac."

"I—I'll see you a little later," said Donald clumsily.

"Donald!"

"Johnny!"

For a full half minute they looked steadily into each other's eyes.

"Only a week, Johnny," pleaded Donald. "I'll be back in a week."

"You mean that you will kill him?"

"He'll never come back. I swear it, Johnny!"

As gently as he might have led Joanne, Aldous drew the mountaineer back to the chair.

"That would be cold-blooded murder," he said, "and I would be the murderer. I can't send you out to do my killing, Mac, as I might send out a hired assassin. Don't you see that I can't? Good heaven, some day—very soon—I will tell you how this hound, Mortimer FitzHugh, poisoned Joanne's life, and did his worst to destroy her. It's to me he's got to answer, Donald. And to me he shall answer. I am going to kill him. But it will not be murder. Since you have come into this room I have made my final plan, and I shall follow it to the end coolly and deliberately. It will be a great game, Mac—and it will be a fair game; and I shall play it happily, because Joanne will not know, and I will be strengthened by her love.

"Quade wants my life, and tried to hire Stevens, up at Miette, to kill me. Culver Rann wants my life; a little later it will come to be the greatest desire of his existence to have me dead and out of the way. I shall give him the chance to do the killing, Mac. I shall give him a splendid chance, and he will not fail to accept his opportunity. Perhaps he will have an advantage, but I am as absolutely certain of killing him as I am that the sun is going down behind the mountains out there. If others should step

in, if I should have more than Culver Rann on my hands—why, then you may deal yourself a hand if you like, Donald. It may be a bigger game than One against One."

"It will," rumbled MacDonald. "I learned other things early this afternoon, Johnny. Quade did not stay behind. He went with Rann. DeBar and the woman are with them, and two other men. They went over the Lone Cache Pass, and this minute are hurrying straight for the headwaters of the Parsnip. There are five of 'em—five men."

"And we are two," smiled Aldous. "So there *is* an advantage on their side, isn't there, Mac? And it makes the game most eminently fair, doesn't it?"

"Johnny, we're good for the five!" cried old Donald in a low, eager voice. "If we start now——"

"Can you have everything ready by morning?"

"The outfit's waiting. It's ready now, Johnny."

"Then we'll leave at dawn. I'll come to you to-night in the coulee, and we'll make our final plans. My brain is a little muddled now, and I've got to clear it, and make myself presentable before supper. We must not let Joanne know. She must suspect nothing—absolutely nothing."

"Nothing," repeated MacDonald as he went to the door.

There he paused and, hesitating for a moment, leaned close to Aldous, and said in a low voice:

"Johnny, I've been wondering why the grave were empty. I've been wondering why there weren't somebody's bones there just t' give it the look it should 'a' had,

an' why the clothes were laid out so nicely with the watch an' the ring on top!"

With that he was gone, and Aldous closed and relocked the door.

He was amazed at his own composure as he washed himself and proceeded to dress for supper. What had happened had stunned him at first, had even terrified him for a few appalling moments. Now he was superbly self-possessed. He asked himself questions and answered them with a promptness which left no room for doubt in his mind as to what his actions should be. One fact he accepted as absolute: Joanne belonged to him. She was his wife. He regarded her as that, even though Mortimer FitzHugh was alive. In the eyes of both God and man FitzHugh no longer had a claim upon her. This man, who was known as Culver Rann, was worse than Quade, a scoundrel of the first water, a procurer, a blackmailer, even a murderer—though he had thus far succeeded in evading the rather loose and poorly working tentacles of mountain law.

Not for an instant did he think of Joanne as Culver Rann's wife. She was *his* wife. It was merely a technicality of the law—a technicality that Joanne might break with her little finger—that had risen now between them and happiness. And it was this that he knew was the mountain in his path, for he was certain that Joanne would not break that last link of bondage. She would know, with Mortimer FitzHugh alive, that the pledge between them in the "coyote," and the marriage ceremony in the room below, meant nothing. Legally, she was no more to him now than she was yesterday, or the day before.

And she would leave him, even if it destroyed her, heart and soul. He was sure of that. For years she had suffered her heart to be ground out of her because of the "bit of madness" that was in her, because of that earlier tragedy in her life—and her promise, her pledge to her father, her God, and herself. Without arguing a possible change in her because of her love for him, John Aldous accepted these things. He believed that if he told Joanne the truth he would lose her.

His determination not to tell her, to keep from her the secret of the grave and the fact that Mortimer FitzHugh was alive, grew stronger in him with each breath that he drew. He believed that it was the right thing to do, that it was the honourable and the only thing to do. Now that the first shock was over, he did not feel that he had lost Joanne, or that there was a very great danger of losing her. For a moment it occurred to him that he might turn the law upon Culver Rann, and in the same breath he laughed at this absurdity. The law could not help him. He alone could work out his own and Joanne's salvation. And what was to happen must happen very soon—up in the mountains. When it was all over, and he returned, he would tell Joanne.

His heart beat more quickly as he finished dressing. In a few minutes more he would be with Joanne, and in spite of what had happened, and what might happen, he was happy. Yesterday he had dreamed. To-day was reality—and it was a glorious reality. Joanne belonged to him. She loved him. She was his wife, and when he went to her it was with the feeling that only a serpent lay in the path of their paradise—a serpent which he would

crush with as little compunction as that serpent would have destroyed her. Utterly and remorselessly his mind was made up.

The Blacktons' supper hour was five-thirty, and he was a quarter of an hour late when he tapped at Joanne's door. He felt the warmth of a strange and delightful embarrassment flushing his face as the door opened, and she stood before him. In her face, too, was a telltale riot of colour which the deep tan partly concealed in his own.

"I—I am a little late, am I not, Joanne?" he asked.

"You are, sir. If you have taken all this time dressing you are worse than a woman. I have been waiting fifteen minutes!"

"Old Donald came to see me," he apologized. "Joanne——"

"You mustn't, John!" she expostulated in a whisper. "My face is afire now! You mustn't kiss me again—until after supper——"

"Only once," he pleaded.

"If you will promise—just once——"

A moment later she gasped:

"Five times! John Aldous, I will never believe you again as long as I live!"

They went down to the Blacktons, and Peggy and Paul, who were busy over some growing geraniums in the dining-room window, faced about with a forced and incongruous appearance of total oblivion to everything that had happened. It lasted less than ten seconds. Joanne's lips quivered. Aldous saw the two little dimples at the corners of her mouth fighting to keep themselves out of sight—

and then he looked at Peggy. Blackton could stand it no longer, and grinned broadly.

"For goodness sake go to it, Peggy!" he laughed. "If you don't you'll explode!"

The next moment Peggy and Joanne were in each other's arms, and the two men were shaking hands.

"We know just how you feel," Blackton tried to explain. "We felt just like you do, only we had to face twenty people instead of two. And you're not hungry. I'll wager that. I'll bet you don't feel like swallowing a mouthful. It had that peculiar effect on us, didn't it, Peggy?"

"And I—I almost choked myself," gurgled Peggy as they took their places at the table. "There really did seem to be something thick in my throat, Joanne, dear. I coughed and coughed and coughed before all those people until I wanted to die right there! And I'm wondering——"

"If I'm going to choke, too?" smiled Joanne. "Indeed not, Peggy. I'm as hungry as a bear!"

And now she did look glorious and self-possessed to Aldous as she sat opposite him at that small round table, which was just fitted for four. He told her so when the meal was finished, and they were following the Blacktons into the front room. Blackton had evidently been carefully drilled along the line of a certain scheme which Peggy had formed, for in spite of a negative nod from her, which signified that he was to wait a while, he pulled out his watch, and said:

"It isn't at all surprising if you people have forgotten that to-morrow is Sunday. Peggy and I always do some Saturday-night shopping, and if you don't mind, we'll

leave you to care for the house while we go to town. We won't be gone more than an hour."

A few minutes later, when the door had closed behind them, Aldous led Joanne to a divan, and sat down beside her.

"I couldn't have arranged it better myself, dear," he exclaimed. "I have been wondering how I could have you alone for a few minutes, and tell you what is on my mind before I see MacDonald again to-night. I'm afraid you will be displeased with me, Joanne. I hardly know how to begin. But—I've got to."

A moment's uneasiness came into her eyes as she saw how seriously he was speaking.

"You don't mean, John—there's more about Quade—and Culver Rann?"

"No, no—nothing like that," he laughed, as though amused at the absurdity of her question. "Old Donald tells me they have skipped the country, Joanne. It's not that. It's you I'm thinking of, and what you may think of me a minute from now. Joanne, I've given my word to old Donald. He has lived in my promise. I've got to keep that promise—I must go into the North with him."

She had drawn one of his hands into her lap and was fondling it with her own soft palm and fingers.

"Of course, you must, John. I love old Donald."

"And I must go—soon," he added.

"It is only fair to him that you should," she agreed.

"He—he is determined we shall go in the morning," he finished, keeping his eyes from her.

For a moment Joanne did not answer. Her fingers

interweaved with his, her warm little palm stroked the rough back of his hand. Then she said, very softly:

"And why do you think that will displease me, John, dear? I will be ready!"

"You!"

Her eyes were on him, full, and dark, and glowing, and in them were both love and laughter.

"You dear silly John!" she laughed. "Why don't you come right out and tell me to stay at home, instead of—of—'beating 'round the bush'—as Peggy Blackton says? Only you don't know what a terrible little person you've got, John. You really don't. So you needn't say any more. We'll start in the morning—and I am going with you!"

In a flash John Aldous saw his whole scheme shaking on its foundation.

"It's impossible—utterly impossible!" he gasped.

"And why utterly?" she asked, bending her head so that her soft hair touched his face and lips. "John, have you already forgotten what we said in that terrible cavern —what we told ourselves we would have done if we had lived? We were going adventuring, weren't we? And we are not dead—but alive. And this will be a glorious trip! Why, John, don't you see, don't you understand? It will be our honeymoon trip!"

"It will be a long, rough journey," he argued. "It will be hard—hard for a woman."

With a little laugh, Joanne sprang up and stood before him in a glow of light, tall, and slim, and splendid, and there was a sparkle of beautiful defiance and a little of triumph in her eyes as she looked down on him.

"And it will be dangerous, too? You are going to tell me that?"

"Yes, it will be dangerous."

She came to him and rumpled up his hair, and turned his face up so that she could look into his eyes.

"Is it worse than fever, and famine, and deep swamps, and crawling jungles?" she asked. "Are we going to encounter worse things than beasts, and poisonous serpents, and murderous savages—even hunger and thirst, John? For many years we dared those together—my father and I. Are these great, big, beautiful mountains more treacherous than those Ceylon jungles from which you ran away—even you, John? Are they more terrible to live in than the Great African Desert? Are your bears worse than tigers, your wolves more terrible than lions? And if, through years and years, I faced those things with my father, do you suppose that I want to be left behind now, and by my husband?"

So sweet and wonderful was the sound of that name as it came softly from her lips, that in his joy he forgot the part he was playing, and drew her close down in his arms, and in that moment all that remained of the scheme he had built for keeping her behind crumbled in ruin about him.

Yet in a last effort he persisted.

"Old Donald wants to travel fast—very fast, Joanne. I owe a great deal to him. Even you I owe to him—for he saved us from the 'coyote.'"

"I am going, John."

"If we went alone we would be able to return very soon."

"I am going."

"And some of the mountains—it is impossible for a woman to climb them!"

"Then I will let you carry me up them, John. You are so strong——"

He groaned hopelessly.

"Joanne, won't you stay with the Blacktons, to please me?"

"No. I don't care to please you."

Her fingers were stroking his cheek.

"John?"

"Yes."

"Father taught me to shoot, and as we get better acquainted on our honeymoon trip I'll tell you about some of my hunting adventures. I don't like to shoot wild things, because I love them too well. But I can shoot. And I want a gun!"

"Great Scott!"

"Not a toy—but a real gun," she continued. "A gun like yours. And then, if by any chance we should have trouble—with Culver Rann——"

She felt him start, and her hands pressed harder against his face.

"Now I know," she whispered. "I guessed it all along. You told me that Culver Rann and the others were after the gold. They've gone—and their going isn't quite 'skipping the country' as you meant me to understand it, John Aldous! So please let's not argue any more. If we do we may quarrel, and that would be terrible. I'm going. And I will be ready in the morning. And I want a gun. And I want you to be nice to me, and I want it to be our honeymoon—even if it is going to be exciting!"

And with that she put her lips to his, and his last argument was gone.

Two hours later, when he went to the coulee, he was like one who had come out of a strange and disturbing and altogether glorious dream. He had told Joanne and the Blacktons that it was necessary for him to be with MacDonald that night. Joanne's good-night kiss was still warm on his lips, the loving touch of her hands still trembled on his face, and the sweet perfume of her hair was in his nostrils. He was drunk with the immeasurable happiness that had come to him, every fibre in him was aquiver with it—and yet, possessed of his great joy, he was conscious of a fear; a fear that was new and growing, and which made him glad when he came at last to the little fire in the coulee.

He did not tell MacDonald the cause of this fear at first. He told the story of Mortimer FitzHugh and Joanne, leaving no part of it unbared, until he could see Donald MacDonald's great gaunt hands clenching in the firelight, and his cavernous eyes flaming darkly through the gloom. Then he told what had happened when the Blacktons went to town, and when he had finished, and rose despairingly beside the fire, Donald rose, too, and his voice boomed in a sort of ecstasy.

"My Jane would ha' done likewise," he cried in triumph. "She would that, Johnny—she would!"

"But this is different!" groaned Aldous. "What am I going to do, Mac? What can I do? Don't you see how impossible it is! Mac, Mac—she isn't my wife—not entirely, not absolutely, not in the last and vital sense of being a wife by law! If she knew the truth, she wouldn't

consider herself my wife; she would leave me. For that reason I can't take her. I can't. Think what it would mean!"

Old Donald had come close to his side, and at the look in the gray old mountaineer's face John Aldous paused. Slowly Donald laid his hands on his shoulders.

"Johnny," he said gently, "Johnny, be you sure of yourself? Be you a man, Johnny?"

"Good heaven, Donald. You mean——"

Their eyes met steadily.

"If you are, Johnny," went on MacDonald in a low voice, "I'd take her with me. An' if you ain't, I'd leave these mount'ins to-night an' never look in her sweet face again as long as I lived."

"You'd take her along?" demanded Aldous eagerly.

"I would. I've been thinkin' it over to-night. An' something seemed to tell me we mustn't dare leave her here alone. There's just two things to do, Johnny. You've got to stay with her an' let me go on alone or—you've got to take her."

Slowly Aldous shook his head. He looked at his watch. It was a little after ten.

"If I could make myself believe that she would not be safe here—I would take her," he said. "But I can't quite make up my mind to that, Mac. She will be in good hands with the Blacktons. I will warn Paul. Joanne is determined to go, and I know she will think it pretty indecent to be told emphatically that she can't go. But I've got to do it. I can't see——"

A break in the stillness of the night stopped him with the suddenness of a bullet in his brain. It was a scream—

a woman's scream, and there followed it shriek after shriek, until the black forest trembled with the fear and agony of the cries, and John Aldous stood as if suddenly stripped of the power to move or act. Donald MacDonald roused him to life. With a roar in his beard, he sprang forth into the darkness. And Aldous followed, a hot sweat of fear in his blood where a moment before had been only a chill of wonder and horror. For in Donald's savage beastlike cry he had caught Joanne's name, and an answering cry broke from his own lips as he followed the great gaunt form that was tearing with the madness of a wounded bear ahead of him through the night.

CHAPTER XXII

NOT until they had rushed up out of the coulee and had reached the pathlike trail did the screaming cease. For barely an instant MacDonald paused, and then ran on with a speed that taxed Aldous to keep up. When they came to the little open amphitheatre in the forest MacDonald halted again. Their hearts were thumping like hammers, and the old mountaineer's voice came husky and choking when he spoke.

"It wasn't far—from here!" he panted.

Scarcely had he uttered the words when he sped on again. Three minutes later they came to where the trail crossed the edge of a small rock-cluttered meadow, and with a sudden spurt Aldous darted ahead of MacDonald into this opening, where he saw two figures in the moonlight. Half a dozen feet from them he stopped with a cry of horror. They were Paul and Peggy Blackton! Peggy was dishevelled and sobbing, and was frantically clutching at her husband. It was Paul Blackton who dragged the cry from his lips. The contractor was swaying. He was hatless; his face was covered with blood, and his eyes were only half open, as if he were fighting to pull himself back into consciousness after a terrible blow. Peggy's hair was down, her dress was torn at the throat, and she was panting so that for a moment she could not speak.

"They've got—Joanne!" she cried then. "They went—there!"

She pointed, and Aldous ran where she pointed—into the timber on the far side of the little meadow. MacDonald caught his arm as they ran.

"You go straight in," he commanded. "I'll swing—to right—toward river——"

For two minutes after that Aldous tore straight ahead. Then for barely a moment he stopped. He had not paused to question Peggy Blackton. His own fears told him who Joanne's abductors were. They were men working under instructions from Quade. And they could not be far away, for scarcely ten minutes had passed since the first scream. He listened, and held his breath so that the terrific beating of his heart would not drown the sound of crackling brush. All at once the blood in him was frozen by a fierce yell. It was MacDonald, a couple of hundred yards to his right, and after that yell came the bellowing shout of his name.

"Johnny! Johnny! Oh, Johnny!"

He dashed in MacDonald's direction, and a few moments later heard the crashing of bodies in the undergrowth. Fifty seconds more and he was in the arena. MacDonald was fighting three men in a space over which the spruce-tops grew thinly. The moon shone upon them as they swayed in a struggling mass, and as Aldous sprang to the combat one of the three reeled backward and fell as if struck by a battering-ram. In that same moment MacDonald went down, and Aldous struck a terrific blow with the butt of his heavy Savage. He missed, and the momentum of his blow carried him over MacDonald. He

tripped and fell. By the time he had regained his feet the two men had disappeared into the thick shadows of the spruce forest. Aldous whirled toward the third man, whom he had seen fall. He, too, had disappeared. A little lamely old Donald brought himself to his feet. He was smiling.

"Now, what do 'ee think, Johnny?"

"Where is she? Where is Joanne?" demanded Aldous.

"Twenty feet behind you, Johnny, gagged an' trussed up nice as a whistle! If they hadn't stopped to do that work you wouldn't ha' seen her ag'in, Johnny—s'elp me, God, you wouldn't! They was hikin' for the river. Once they had reached the Frazer, and a boat——"

He broke off to lead Aldous to a clump of dwarf spruce. Behind this, white and still in the moonlight, but with eyes wide open and filled with horror, lay Joanne. Hands and feet were bound, and a big handkerchief was tied over her mouth. Twenty seconds later Aldous held her shivering and sobbing and laughing hysterically by turns in his arms, while MacDonald's voice brought Paul and Peggy Blackton to them. Blackton had recovered from the blow that had dazed him. Over Joanne's head he stared at Aldous. And MacDonald was staring at Blackton. His eyes were burning a little darkly.

"It's all come out right," he said, "but it ain't a special nice time o' night to be taking a' evening walk in this locality with a couple o' ladies!"

Blackton was still staring at Aldous, with Peggy clutching his arm as if afraid of losing him.

It was Peggy who answered MacDonald.

"And it was a nice time of night for you to send a

message asking us to bring Joanne down the trail!" she cried, her voice trembling.

"We——" began Aldous, when he saw a sudden warning movement on MacDonald's part, and stopped. "Let us take the ladies home," he said.

With Joanne clinging to him, he led the way. Behind them all MacDonald growled loudly:

"There's got t' be something done with these damned beasts of furriners. It's gettin' so no woman ain't safe at night!"

Twenty minutes later they reached the bungalow. Leaving Joanne and Peggy inside, now as busily excited as two phœbe birds, and after Joanne had insisted upon Aldous sleeping at the Blacktons' that night, the two men accompanied MacDonald a few steps on his way back to camp.

As soon as they were out of earshot Blackton began cursing softly under his breath.

"So you didn't send that damned note?" he asked. "You haven't said so, but I've guessed you didn't send it!"

"No, we didn't send a note."

"And you had a reason—you and MacDonald—for not wanting the girls to know the truth?"

"A mighty good reason," said Aldous. "I've got to thank MacDonald for closing my mouth at the right moment. I was about to give it away. And now, Blackton, I've got to confide in you. But before I do that I want your word that you will repeat nothing of what I say to another person—even your wife."

Blackton nodded.

"Go on," he said. "I've suspected a thing or two, Aldous. I'll give you my word. Go on."

As briefly as possible, and without going deeply into detail, Aldous told of Quade and his plot to secure possession of Joanne.

"And this is his work," he finished. "I've told you this, Paul, so that you won't worry about Peggy. You can see from to-night's events that they were not after her, but wanted Joanne. Joanne must not learn the truth. And your wife must not know. I am going to settle with Quade. Just how and where and when I'm going to settle with him I don't care to say now. But he's going to answer to me. And he's going to answer soon."

Blackton whistled softly.

"A boy brought the note," he said. "He stood in the dark when he handed it to me. And I didn't recognize any one of the three men who jumped out on us. I didn't have much of a chance to fight, but if there's any one on the face of the earth who has got it over Peggy when it comes to screaming, I'd like to know her name! Joanne didn't have time to make a sound. But they didn't touch Peggy until she began screaming, and then one of the men began choking her. They had about laid me out with a club, so I was helpless. Good God——"

He shuddered.

"They were river men," said MacDonald. "Probably some of Tomman's scow-men. They were making for the river."

A few minutes later, when Aldous was saying good-night to MacDonald, the old hunter said again, in a whisper:

"Now what do 'ee think, Johnny?"

"That you're right, Mac," replied Aldous in a low voice. "There is no longer a choice. Joanne must go with us. You will come early?"

"At dawn, Johnny."

He returned to the bungalow with Blackton, and until midnight the lights there burned brightly while the two men answered a thousand questions about the night's adventure, and Aldous told of his and Joanne's plans for the honeymoon trip into the North that was to begin the next day.

It was half-past twelve when he locked the door of his room and sat down to think.

CHAPTER XXIII

THERE was no doubt in the mind of John Aldous now. The attempt upon Joanne left him but one course to pursue: he must take her with him, in spite of the monumental objections which he had seen a few hours before. He realized what a fight this would mean for him, and with what cleverness and resource he must play his part. Joanne had not given herself to him as she had once given herself to Mortimer FitzHugh. In the "coyote," when they had faced death, she had told him that were there to be a to-morrow in life for them she would have given herself to him utterly and without reservation. And that to-morrow had dawned. It was present. She was his wife. And she had come to him as she had promised. In her eyes he had seen love and trust and faith—and a glorious happiness. She had made no effort to hide that happiness from him. Consciousness of it filled him with his own great happiness, and yet it made him realize even more deeply how hard his fight was to be. She was his wife. In a hundred little ways she had shown him that she was proud of her wifehood. And again he told himself that she had come to him as she had promised, that she had given into his keeping all that she had to give. And yet—*she was not his wife!*

He groaned aloud, and his fingers dug into the flesh of his knees as he thought of that. Could he keep that

terrible truth from her? If she went with him into the North, would she not guess? And, even though he kept the truth from her until Mortimer FitzHugh was dead, would he be playing fair with her? Again he went over all that he had gone over before. He knew that Joanne would leave him to-morrow, and probably forever, if he told her that FitzHugh was alive. The law could not help him, for only death—and never divorce—would free her. Within himself he decided for the last time. He was about to do the one thing left for him to do. And it was the honourable thing, for it meant freedom for her and happiness for them both. To him, Donald MacDonald had become a man who lived very close to the heart and the right of things, and Donald had said that he should take her. This was the greatest proof that he was right.

But could he keep Joanne from guessing? Could he keep her from discovering the truth until it was time for her to know that truth? In this necessity of keeping her from suspecting that something was wrong he saw his greatest fight. Compared with it, the final settlement with Quade and Mortimer FitzHugh sank into a second importance. He knew what would happen then. But Joanne—Joanne on the trail, as his wife——

He began pacing back and forth in his room, clouding himself in the smoke of his pipe. Frequently Joanne's mind had filled him with an exquisite delight by its quickness and at times almost magic perceptiveness, and he realized that in these things, and the fineness of her woman's intuition, now lay his greatest menace. He was sure that she understood the meaning of the assault upon her that night, though she had apparently believed what

he and Blackton had told them—that it had been the attack of irresponsible and drunken hoodlums. Yet he was certain that she had already guessed that Quade had been responsible.

He went to bed, dreading what questions and new developments the morning might bring forth. And when the morning came, he was both amazed and delighted. The near tragedy of the previous night might never have happened in so far as he could judge from Joanne's appearance. When she came out of her room to meet him, in the glow of a hall lamp, her eyes were like stars, and the colour in her cheeks was like that of a rose fresh from its slumber in dew.

"I'm so happy, and what happened last night seems so like a bad dream," she whispered, as he held her close to him for a few moments before descending the stairs. "I shall worry about Peggy, John. I shall. I don't understand how her husband dares to bring her among savages like these. You wouldn't leave me among them, would you?" And as she asked the question, and his lips pressed hers, John Aldous still believed that in her heart she knew the truth of that night attack.

If she did know, she kept her secret from him all that day. They left Tête Jaune before sunrise with an outfit which MacDonald had cut down to six horses. Its smallness roused Joanne's first question, for Aldous had described to her an outfit of twenty horses. He explained that a large outfit made travel much more difficult and slow, but he did not tell her that with six horses instead of twenty they could travel less conspicuously, more easily conceal themselves from enemies, and, if necessary, make quick flight or swift pursuit.

They stopped to camp for the night in a little basin that drew from Joanne an exclamation of joy and wonder. They had reached the upper timber-line, and on three sides the basin was shut in by treeless and brush-naked walls of the mountains. In the centre of the dip was a lake fed by a tiny stream that fell in a series of ribbonlike cataracts a sheer thousand feet from the snow-peaks that towered above them. Small, parklike clumps of spruce dotted the miniature valley; over it hung a sky as blue as sapphire and under their feet was a carpet of soft grass sprayed with little blue forget-me-nots and wild asters.

"I have never seen anything a half so beautiful as this!" cried Joanne, as Aldous helped her from her horse.

As her feet touched the ground she gave a little cry and hung limply in his arms.

"I'm lame—lame for life!" she laughed in mock humour. "John, I can't stand. I really can't!"

Old Donald was chuckling in his beard as he came up.

"You ain't nearly so lame as you'll be to-morrow," he comforted her. "An' you won't be nearly so lame to-morrow as you'll be next day. Then you'll begin to get used to it, Mis' Joanne."

"*Mrs. Aldous*, Donald," she corrected sweetly. "Or—just Joanne."

At that Aldous found himself holding her so closely that she gave a little gasp.

"Please don't," she expostulated. "Your arms are terribly strong, John!"

MacDonald had turned away, still chuckling, and began to unpack. Joanne looked behind her, then quickly held up her softly pouted lips. Aldous kissed her, and would

have kissed her again but she slipped suddenly from his arms and going to Pinto began to untie a dishpan that was fastened to the top of his pack.

"Get to work, John Aldous!" she commanded.

MacDonald had camped before in the basin, and there were tepee poles ready cut, as light and dry as matchwood. Joanne watched them as they put up the tent, and when it was done, and she looked inside, she cried delightedly:

"It's the snuggest little home I ever had, John!"

After that she busied herself in a way that was a constantly growing pleasure to him. She took possession at once of pots and pans and kettles. She lost no time in impressing upon both Aldous and MacDonald the fact that while she was their docile follower on the trail she was to be at the head of affairs in camp. While they were straightening out the outfit, hobbling the horses, and building a fire, she rummaged through the panniers and took stock of their provisions. She bossed old Donald in a manner that made him fairly glow with pleasure. She bared her white arms to the elbows and made biscuits for the "reflector" instead of bannock, while Aldous brought water from the lake, and MacDonald cut wood. Her cheeks were aflame. Her eyes were laughing, joyous, happy. MacDonald seemed years younger. He obeyed her like a boy, and once Aldous caught him looking at her in a way that set him thinking again of those days of years and years ago, and of other camps, and of another woman—like Joanne.

MacDonald had thought of this first camp—and there were porterhouse steaks for supper, which he had brought

packed in a kettle of ice. When they sat down to the meal, Joanne was facing a distant snow-capped ridge that cut the skyline, and the last of the sun, reflected from the face of the mountain on the east, had set brown-and-gold fires aglow in her hair. They were partly through when her eyes rested on the distant snow-ridge. Aldous saw her looking steadily. Suddenly she pointed beyond him.

"I see something moving over the snow on that mountain!" she cried a little excitedly. "It is hurrying toward the summit—just under the skyline! What is it?"

Aldous and MacDonald looked toward the ridge. Fully a mile away, almost even with the skyline now, a small dark object was moving over the white surface of the snow.

"It ain't a goat," said MacDonald, "because a goat is white, and we couldn't see it on the snow. It ain't a sheep, 'cause it's too dark, an' movin' too slow. It must be a bear, but why in the name o' sin a bear would be that high, I don't know!"

He jumped up and ran for his telescope.

"A grizzly," whispered Joanne tensely. "Would it be a grizzly, John?"

"Possibly," he answered. "Indeed, it's very likely. This is a grizzly country. If we hurry you can get a look at him through the telescope."

MacDonald was already studying the object through his long glass when they joined him.

"It's a bear," he said.

"Please—please let me look at him," begged Joanne.

The dark object was now almost on the skyline. Half a minute more and it would pass over and out of sight.

MacDonald still held his eye to the telescope, as though he had not heard Joanne. Not until the moving object had crossed the skyline, and had disappeared, did he reply to her.

"The light's bad, an' you couldn't have made him out very well," he said. "We'll show you plenty o' grizzlies, an' so near you won't want a telescope. Eh, Johnny?"

As he looked at Aldous there was a strange look in his eyes, and during the remainder of the supper he was restless, and ate hurriedly. When he had finished he rose and picked up his long rifle.

"There's sheep somewhere near this basin, Johnny," he explained. "An' I reckon Joanne'll scold us if we don't keep her in fresh meat. I'm goin' to bring in some mutton if there's any to be got, an' I probably won't be back until after dark."

Aldous knew that he had more to say, and he went with him a few steps beyond the camp.

And MacDonald continued in a low, troubled voice:

"Be careful, Johnny. Watch yo'rself. I'm going to take a look over into the next valley, an' I won't be back until late. It wasn't a goat, an' it wasn't a sheep, an' it wasn't a bear. It was two-legged! It was a man, Johnny, an' he was there to watch this trail, or my name ain't Donald MacDonald. Mebby he came ahead of us last night, an' mebby he was here before that happened. Anyway, be on your guard while I look over into the next range."

With that he struck off in the direction of the snow-ridge, and for a few moments Aldous stood looking after the tall, picturesque figure until it disappeared behind a clump

of spruce. Swiftly he was telling himself that it was not the hunting season, and that it was not a prospector whom they had seen on the snow-ridge. As a matter of caution, there could be but one conclusion to draw. The man had been stationed there either by Quade or FitzHugh, or both, and had unwittingly revealed himself.

He turned toward Joanne, who had already begun to gather up the supper things. He could hear her singing happily, and as he looked she pressed a finger to her lips and threw a kiss to him. His heart smote him even as he smiled and waved a hand in response. Then he went to her. How slim and wonderful she looked in that glow of the setting sun, he thought. How white and soft were her hands, how tender and fragile her lovely neck! And how helpless—how utterly helpless she would be if anything happened to him and MacDonald! With an effort he flung the thought from him. On his knees he wiped the dishes and pots and pans for Joanne. When this was done, he seized an axe and showed her how to gather a bed. This was a new and delightful experience for Joanne.

"You always want to cut balsam boughs when you can get them," he explained, pausing before two small trees. "Now, this is a cedar, and this is a balsam. Notice how prickly and needlelike on all sides these cedar branches are. And now look at the balsam. The needles lay flat and soft. Balsam makes the best bed you can get in the North, except moss, and you've got to dry the moss."

For fifteen minutes he clipped off the soft ends of the balsam limbs and Joanne gathered them in her arms and carried them into the tepee. Then he went in with her,

and showed her how to make the bed. He made it a narrow bed, and a deep bed, and he knew that Joanne was watching him, and he was glad the tan hid the uncomfortable glow in his face when he had finished tucking in the end of the last blanket.

"You will be as cozy as can be in that," he said.

"And you, John?" she asked, her face flushing rosily. "I haven't seen another tent for you and Donald."

"We don't sleep in a tent during the summer," he said. "Just our blankets—out in the open."

"But—if it should rain?"

"We get under a balsam or a spruce or a thick cedar."

A little later they stood beside the fire. It was growing dusk. The distant snow-ridge was swiftly fading into a pale and ghostly sheet in the gray gloom of the night. Up that ridge Aldous knew that MacDonald was toiling.

Joanne put her hands to his shoulders.

"Are you sorry—so very, very sorry that you let me come, John?"

"I didn't let you come," he laughed softly, drawing her to him. "You came!"

"And are you sorry?"

"No."

It was deliciously sweet to have her tilt up her head and put her soft lips to his, and it was still sweeter when her tender hands stroked his cheeks, and eyes and lips smiled their love and gladness. He stood stroking her hair, with her face laying warm and close against him, and over her head he stared into the thickening darkness of the spruce and cedar copses. Joanne herself had piled wood on the fire, and in its glow they were dangerously illum-

inated. With one of her hands she was still caressing his cheek.

"When will Donald return?" she asked.

"Probably not until late," he replied, wondering what it was that had set a stone rolling down the side of the mountain nearest to them. "He hunted until dark, and may wait for the moon to come up before he returns."

"John——"

"Yes, dear——" And mentally he measured the distance to the nearest clump of timber between them and the mountain.

"Let's build a big fire, and sit down on the pannier canvases."

His eyes were still on the timber, and he was wondering what a man with a rifle, or even a pistol, might do at that space. He made a good target, and MacDonald was probably several miles away.

"I've been thinking about the fire," he said. "We must put it out, Joanne. There are reasons why we should not let it burn. For one thing, the smoke will drive any game away that we may hope to see in the morning."

Her hands lay still against his cheek.

"I—understand, John," she replied quickly, and there was the smallest bit of a shudder in her voice. "I had forgotten. We must put it out!"

Five minutes later only a few glowing embers remained where the fire had been. He had spread out the pannier canvases, and now he seated himself with his back to a tree. Joanne snuggled close to him.

"It is much nicer in the dark," she whispered, and her arms reached up about him, and her lips pressed warm

and soft against his hand. "Are you just a little ashamed of me, John?"

"Ashamed? Good heaven——"

"Because," she interrupted him, "we have known each other such a very short time, and I have allowed myself to become so very, very well acquainted with you. It has all been so delightfully sudden, and strange, and I am—just as happy as I can be. You don't think it is immodest for me to say these things to my husband, John—even if I have only known him three days?"

He answered by crushing her so closely in his arms that for a few moments afterward she lay helplessly on his breast, gasping for breath. His brain was afire with the joyous madness of possession. Never had woman come to man more sweetly than Joanne had come to him, and as he felt her throbbing and trembling against him he was ready to rise up and shout forth a challenge to a hundred Quades and Culver Ranns hiding in the darkness of the mountains. For a long time he held her nestled close in his arms, and at intervals there were silences between them, in which they listened to the glad tumult of their own hearts, and the strange silence that came to them from out of the still night.

It was their first hour alone—of utter oblivion to all else but themselves; to Joanne the first sacrament hour of her wifehood, to him the first hour of perfect possession and understanding. In that hour their souls became one, and when at last they rose to their feet, and the moon came up over a crag of the mountain and flooded them in its golden light, there was in Joanne's face a tenderness and a gentle glory that made John Aldous think of an

angel. He led her to the tepee, and lighted a candle for her, and at the last, with the sweet demand of a child in the manner of her doing it, she pursed up her lips to be kissed good-night.

And when he had tied the tent-flap behind her, he took his rifle and sat down with it across his knees in the deep black shadow of a spruce, and waited and listened for the coming of Donald MacDonald.

CHAPTER XXIV

FOR an hour after Joanne had gone into her tent Aldous sat silent and watchful. From where he had concealed himself he could see over a part of the moonlit basin, and guard the open space between the camp and the clump of timber that lay in the direction of the nearest mountain. After Joanne had blown out her candle the silence of the night seemed to grow deeper about him. The hobbled horses had wandered several hundred yards away, and only now and then could he hear the thud of a hoof, or the clank of a steel shoe on rock. He believed that it was impossible for any one to approach without ears and eyes giving him warning, and he felt a distinct shock when Donald MacDonald suddenly appeared in the moonlight not twenty paces from him. With an ejaculation of amazement he jumped to his feet and went to him.

"How the deuce did you get here?" he demanded.

"Were you asleep, Johnny?"

"I was awake—and watching!"

The old hunter chuckled.

"It was so still when I come to those trees back there that I thought mebby something had 'appened," he said. "So, I sneaked up, Johnny."

"Did you see anything over the range?" asked Aldous anxiously.

"I found footprints in the snow, an' when I got to the top I smelled smoke, but couldn't see a fire. It was dark then." MacDonald nodded toward the tepee. "Is she asleep, Johnny?"

"I think so. She must be very tired."

They drew back into the shadow of the spruce. It was a simultaneous movement of caution, and both, without speaking their thoughts, realized the significance of it. Until now they had had no opportunity of being alone since last night.

MacDonald spoke in a low, muffled voice:

"Quade an' Culver Rann are goin' the limit, Johnny," he said. "They left men on the job at Tête Jaune, and they've got others watching us. Consequently, I've hit on a scheme—a sort of simple and onreasonable scheme, mebby, but an awful good scheme at times."

"What is it?"

"Whenever you see anything that ain't a bear, or a goat, or a sheep, don't wait to change the time o' day—but shoot!" said MacDonald.

Aldous smiled grimly.

"If I had any ideas of chivalry, or what I call fair play, they were taken out of me last night, Mac," he said. "I'm ready to shoot on sight!"

MacDonald grunted his satisfaction.

"They can't beat us if we do that, Johnny. They ain't even ordinary cut-throats—they're sneaks in the bargain; an' if they could walk in our camp, smilin' an' friendly, and brain us when our backs was turned, they'd do it. We don't know who's with them, and if a stranger heaves in sight meet him with a chunk o' lead. They're the only

ones in these mountains, an' we won't make any mistake. See that bunch of spruce over there?"

The old hunter pointed to a clump fifty yards beyond the tepee toward the little lake. Aldous nodded.

"I'll take my blankets over there," continued MacDonald. "You roll yourself up here, and the tepee'll be between us. You see the system, Johnny? If they make us a visit during the night we've got 'em between us, and there'll be some real burying to do in the morning!"

Back under the low-hanging boughs of the dwarf spruce Aldous spread out his blanket a few minutes later. He had made up his mind not to sleep, and for hours he lay watchful and waiting, smoking occasionally, with his face close to the ground so that the odour of tobacco would cling to the earth. The moon rose until it was straight overhead, flooding the valley in a golden splendour that he wished Joanne might have seen. Then it began sinking into the west; slowly at first, and then more swiftly, its radiance diminished. He looked at his watch before the yellow orb effaced itself behind the towering peak of a distant mountain. It was a quarter of two.

With deepening darkness, his eyes grew heavier. He closed them for a few moments at a time; and each time the interval was longer, and it took greater effort to force himself into wakefulness. Finally he slept. But he was still subconsciously on guard, and an hour later that consciousness was beating and pounding within him, urging him to awake. He sat up with a start and gripped his rifle. An owl was hooting—softly, very softly. There were four notes. He answered, and a little later MacDonald came like a shadow out of the gloom. Aldous ad-

vanced to meet him, and he noticed that over the eastern mountains there was a break of gray.

"It's after three, Johnny," MacDonald greeted him. "Build a fire and get breakfast. Tell Joanne I'm out after another sheep. Until it's good an' light I'm going to watch from that clump of timber up there. In half an hour it'll be dawn."

He moved toward the timber, and Aldous set about building a fire. He was careful not to awaken Joanne. The fire was crackling cheerily when he went to the lake for water. Returning he saw the faint glow of candle-light in Joanne's tepee. Five minutes later she appeared, and all thought of danger, and the discomfort of his sleep-less night, passed from him at sight of her. Her eyes were still a little misty with sleep when he took her in his arms and kissed her, but she was deliciously alive, and glad, and happy. In one hand she had brought a brush and in the other a comb.

"You slept like a log," he cried happily. "It can't be that you had very bad dreams, little wife?"

"I had a beautiful dream, John," she laughed softly, and the colour flooded up into her face.

She unplaited the thick silken strands of her braid and began brushing her hair in the firelight, while Aldous sliced the bacon. Some of the slices were thick, and some were thin, for he could not keep his eyes from her as she stood there like a goddess, buried almost to her knees in that wondrous mantle. He found himself whistling with a very light heart as she braided her hair, and afterward plunged her face in a bath of cold water he had brought from the lake. From that bath she emerged like a glowing

Naiad. Her eyes sparkled. Her cheeks were pink and her lips full and red. Damp little tendrils of hair clung adorably about her face and neck. For another full minute Aldous paused in his labours, and he wondered if MacDonald was watching them from the clump of timber. The bacon was sputtering when Joanne ran to it and rescued it from burning.

Dawn followed quickly after that first break of day in the east, but not until one could see a full rifle-shot away did MacDonald return to the camp. Breakfast was waiting, and as soon as he had finished the old hunter went after the horses. It was five o'clock, and bars of the sun were shooting over the tops of the mountains when once more they were in the saddle and on their way.

Most of this day Aldous headed the outfit up the valley. On the pretext of searching for game MacDonald rode so far in advance that only twice during the forenoon was he in sight. When they stopped to camp for the night his horse was almost exhausted, and MacDonald himself showed signs of tremendous physical effort. Aldous could not question him before Joanne. He waited. And MacDonald was strangely silent.

The proof of MacDonald's prediction concerning Joanne was in evidence this second night. Every bone in her body ached, and she was so tired that she made no objection to going to her bed as soon as it was dark.

"It always happens like this," consoled old Donald, as she bade him good-night. "To-morrow you'll begin gettin' broke in, an' the next day you won't have any lameness at all."

She limped to the tepee with John's arm snugly about

her slim waist. MacDonald waited patiently until he returned. He motioned Aldous to seat himself close at his side. Both men lighted their pipes before the mountaineer spoke.

"We can't both sleep at once to-night, Johnny," he said. "We've got to take turns keeping watch."

"You've discovered something to-day?"

"No. It's what I haven't discovered that counts. There weren't no tracks in this valley, Johnny, from mount'in to mount'in. They haven't travelled through this range, an' that leaves just two things for us to figger on. They're behind us—or DeBar is hitting another trail into the north. There isn't no danger ahead right now, because we're gettin' into the biggest ranges between here an' the Yukon. If Quade and Rann are in the next valley they can't get over the mount'ins to get at us. Quade, with all his flesh, couldn't climb over that range to the west of us inside o' three days, if he could get over it at all. They're hikin' straight for the gold over another trail, or they're behind us, an' mebby both."

"How—both?" asked Aldous.

"Two parties," explained MacDonald, puffing hard at his pipe. "If there's an outfit behind us they were hid in the timber on the other side of the snow-ridge, and they're pretty close this minute. Culver Rann—or FitzHugh, as you call him—is hustling straight on with DeBar. Mebby Quade is with him, an' mebby he ain't. Anyway, there's a big chance of a bunch behind us with special instructions from Quade to cut our throats and keep Joanne."

That day Aldous had been turning a question over in his own mind. He asked it now.

"Mac, are you sure you can go to the valley of gold without DeBar?"

For a long half minute MacDonald looked at him, and then his voice rumbled in a low, exultant laugh in his beard.

"Johnny," he said, with a strange quiver in his voice, "I can go to it now straighter an' quicker than DeBar! I know why I never found it. DeBar helped me that much. The trail is mapped right out in my brain now, Johnny. Five years ago I was within ten miles of the cavern—an' didn't know it!"

"And we can get there ahead of them?"

"We could—if it wasn't for Joanne. We're makin' twenty miles a day. We could make thirty."

"If we could beat them to it!" exclaimed Aldous clenching his hands. "If we only could, Donald—the rest would be easy!"

MacDonald laid a heavy hand on his knee.

"You remember what you told me, Johnny, that you'd play the game fair, and give 'em a first chance? You ain't figgerin' on that now, be you?"

"No. I'm with you now, Donald. It's——"

"Shoot on sight!"

"Yes."

Aldous rose from his seat as he spoke.

"You turn in, Mac," he said. "You're about bushed after the work you've done to-day. I'll keep first watch. I'll conceal myself fifty or sixty yards from camp, and if we have visitors before midnight the fun will all be mine."

He knew that MacDonald was asleep within fifteen

minutes after he had stationed himself at his post. In spite of the fact that he had had almost no sleep the preceding night, he was more than usually wakeful. He was filled with a curious feeling that events were impending. Yet the hours passed, the moon flooded the valley again, the horses grazed without alarm, and nothing happened. He had planned not to awaken old Donald at midnight, but MacDonald roused himself, and came to take his place a little before twelve. From that hour until four Aldous slept like the dead. He was tremendously refreshed when he arose, to find that the candle was alight in Joanne's tepee, and that MacDonald had built a fire. He waited for Joanne, and went with her to the tiny creek near the camp, where both bathed their faces in the snow-cold water from the mountain tops. Joanne had slept soundly for eight hours, and she was as fresh and as happy as a bird. Her lameness was almost gone, and she was eager for the day's journey.

As they filed again up the valley that morning, with the early sun transfiguring the great snow-topped ranges about them into a paradise of colour and warmth, Aldous found himself mentally wondering if it were really possible that a serious danger menaced them. He did not tell MacDonald what was in his mind. He did not confess that he was about ready to believe that the man on the snow-ridge had been a hunter or a prospector returning to his camp in the other valley, and that the attack in Tête Jaune was the one and only effort Quade would make to secure possession of Joanne. While a few hours before he had almost expected an immediate attack, he was now becoming more and more convinced that Quade, to a large

extent, had dropped out of the situation. He might be with Mortimer FitzHugh, and probably was—a dangerous and formidable enemy to be accounted for when the final settlement came.

But as an immediate menace to Joanne, Aldous was beginning to fear him less as the hours passed. Joanne, and the day itself, were sufficient to disarm him of his former apprehension. In places they could see for miles ahead and behind them. And Joanne, each time that he looked at her, was a greater joy to him. Constantly she was pointing out the wonders of the mountains to him and MacDonald. Each new rise or fall in the valley held fresh and delightful surprises for her; in the craggy peaks she pointed out castlements, and towers, and battlemented strongholds of ancient princes and kings. Her mind was a wild and beautiful riot of imagination, of wonder, and of happiness, and in spite of the grimness of the mission they were on even MacDonald found himself rejoicing in her spirit, and he laughed and talked with them as they rode into the North.

They were entering now into a hunter's paradise. For the first time Joanne saw white, moving dots far up on a mountain-side, which MacDonald told her were goats. In the afternoon they saw mountain sheep feeding on a slide half a mile away, and for ten breathless minutes Joanne watched them through the telescope. Twice caribou sped over the opens ahead of them. But it was not until the sun was settling toward the west again that Joanne saw what she had been vainly searching the sides of the mountains to find. MacDonald had stopped suddenly in the trail, motioning them to advance. When

they rode up to him he pointed to a green slope two hundred yards ahead

"There's yo'r grizzly, Joanne," he said.

A huge, tawny beast was ambling slowly along the crest of the slope, and at sight of him Joanne gave a little cry of excitement.

"He's hunting for gophers," explained MacDonald. "That's why he don't seem in a hurry. He don't see us because a b'ar's eyes are nearsighted, but he could smell us half a mile away if the wind was right."

He was unslinging his long rifle as he spoke. Joanne was near enough to catch his arm.

"Don't shoot—please don't shoot!" she begged. "I've seen lions, and I've seen tigers—and they're treacherous and I don't like them. But there's something about bears that I love, like dogs. And the lion isn't a king among beasts compared with him. Please don't shoot!"

"I ain't a-goin' to," chuckled old Donald. "I'm just getting ready to give 'im the proper sort of a handshake if he should happen to come this way, Joanne. You know a grizzly ain't pertic'lar afraid of anything on earth as I know of, an' they're worse 'n a dynamite explosion when they come head-on. There—he's goin' over the slope!"

"Got our wind," said Aldous.

They went on, a colour in Joanne's face like the vivid sunset. They camped two hours before dusk, and MacDonald figured they had made better than twenty miles that day. The same precautions were observed in guarding the camp as the night before, and the long hours of vigil were equally uneventful. The next day added still more to Aldous' peace of mind regarding possible attack

from Quade, and on the night of this day, their fourth in the mountains, he spoke his mind to MacDonald.

For a few moments afterward the old hunter smoked quietly at his pipe. Then he said:

"I don't know but you're right, Johnny. If they were behind us they'd most likely have tried something before this. But it ain't in the law of the mount'ins to be careless. We've got to watch."

"I agree with you there, Mac," replied Aldous. "We cannot afford to lose our caution for a minute. But I'm feeling a deuced sight better over the situation just the same. If we can only get there ahead of them!"

"If Quade is in the bunch we've got a chance of beating them," said MacDonald thoughtfully. "He's heavy, Johnny—that sort of heaviness that don't stand up well in the mount'ins; whisky-flesh, I call it. Culver Rann don't weigh much more'n half as much, but he's like iron. Quade may be a drag. An' Joanne, Lord bless her!—she's facing the music like an' 'ero, Johnny!"

"And the journey is almost half over."

"This is the fourth day. I figger we can make it in ten at most, mebby nine," said old Donald. "You see we're in that part of the Rockies where there's real mount'ins, an' the ranges ain't broke up much. We've got fairly good travel to the end."

On this night Aldous slept from eight until twelve. The next, their fifth, his watch was from midnight until morning. As the sixth and the seventh days and nights passed uneventfully the belief that there were no enemies behind them became a certainty. Yet neither Aldous nor MacDonald relaxed their vigilance.

The eighth day dawned, and now a new excitement took possession of Donald MacDonald. Joanne and Aldous saw his efforts to suppress it, but it did not escape their eyes. They were nearing the tragic scenes of long ago, and old Donald was about to reap the reward of a search that had gone faithfully and untiringly through the winters and summers of forty years. He spoke seldom that day. There were strange lights in his eyes. And once his voice was husky and strained when he said to Aldous:

"I guess we'll make it to-mcrrow, Johnny—jus' about as the sun's going down."

They camped early, and Aldous rolled himself in his blanket when Joanne extinguished the candle in her tent. He found that he could not sleep, and he relieved MacDonald at eleven o'clock.

"Get all the rest you can, Mac," he urged. "There may be doings to-morrow—at about sundown."

There was but little moonlight now, but the stars were clear. He lighted his pipe, and with his rifle in the crook of his arm he walked slowly up and down over a hundred-yard stretch of the narrow plain in which they had camped. That night they had built their fire beside a fallen log, which was now a glowing mass without flame. Finally he sat down with his back to a rock fifty paces from Joanne's tepee. It was a splendid night. The air was cool and sweet. He leaned back until his head rested against the rock, and there fell upon him the fatal temptation to close his eyes and snatch a few minutes of the slumber which had not come to him during the early hours of the night. He was in a doze, oblivious to movement and the softer sounds of the night, when a

cry pierced the struggling consciousness of his brain like the sting of a dart. In an instant he was on his feet.

In the red glow of the log stood Joanne in her long white night robe. She seemed to be swaying when he first saw her. Her hands were clutched at her bosom, and she was staring—staring out into the night beyond the burning log, and in her face was a look of terror. He sprang toward her, and out of the gloom beyond her rushed Donald MacDonald. With a cry she turned to Aldous and flung herself shivering and half-sobbing into his arms. Gray-faced, his eyes burning like the smouldering coals in the fire, Donald MacDonald stood a step behind them, his long rifle in his hands.

"What is it?" cried Aldous. "What has frightened you, Joanne?"

She was shuddering against his breast.

"It—it must have been a dream," she said. "It—it frightened me. But it was so terrible, and I'm—I'm sorry, John. I didn't know what I was doing."

"What was it, dear?" insisted Aldous.

MacDonald had drawn very close.

Joanne raised her head.

"Please let me go back to bed, John. It was only a dream, and I'll tell it to you in the morning, when there's sunshine—and day."

Something in MacDonald's tense, listening attitude caught Aldous' eyes.

"What was the dream?" he urged.

She looked from him to old Donald, and shivered.

"The flap of my tepee was open," she said slowly. "I thought I was awake. I thought I could see the glow of

the fire. But it was a dream—a *dream*, only it was horrible! For as I looked I saw a face out there in the light, a white, searching face—and it was his face!"

"Whose face?"

"Mortimer FitzHugh's," she shuddered.

Tenderly Aldous led her back to the tent.

"Yes, it was surely an unpleasant dream, dear," he comforted her. "Try and sleep again. You must get all the rest you can."

He closed the flap after her, and turned back toward MacDonald. The old hunter had disappeared. It was ten minutes before he came in from out of the darkness. He went straight to Aldous.

"Johnny, you was asleep!"

"I'm afraid I was, Mac—just for a minute."

MacDonald's fingers gripped his arm.

"Jus' for a minute, Johnny—an' in that minute you lost the chance of your life!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean"—and old Donald's voice was filled with a low, choking tremble that Aldous had never heard in it before—"I mean that it weren't no dream, Johnny! Mortimer FitzHugh was in this camp to-night!"

CHAPTER XXV

DONALD MacDONALD'S startling assertion that Mortimer FitzHugh had been in the camp, and that Joanne's dream was not a dream, but reality, brought a gasp of astonishment and disbelief from Aldous. Before he had recovered sufficiently from his amazement to speak, MacDonald was answering the question in his mind.

"I woke quicker'n you, Johnny," he said. "She was just coming out of the tepee, an' I heard something running off through the brush. I thought mebby it was a wolverine, or a bear, an' I didn't move until she cried out your name an' you jumped up. If she had seen a bear in the fire-glow she wouldn't have thought it was Mortimer FitzHugh, would she? It's possible, but it ain't likely, though I do say it's mighty queer why he should be in this camp alone. It's up to us to watch pretty close until daylight."

"He wouldn't be here alone," asserted Aldous. "Let's get out of the light, Mac. If you're right, the whole gang isn't far away!"

"They ain't in rifle-shot," said MacDonald. "I heard him running a hundred yards out there. That's the queer thing about it! Why didn't they jump on us when they had the chance?"

"We'll hope that it was a dream," replied Aldous. "If

Joanne was dreaming of FitzHugh, and while still half asleep saw something in camp, she might easily imagine the rest. But we'll keep watch. Shall I move out there?"

MacDonald nodded, and the two men separated. For two hours they patrolled the darkness, waiting and listening. With dawn Aldous returned to camp to arouse Joanne and begin breakfast. He was anxious to see what effect the incident of the night had on her. Her appearance reassured him. When he referred to the dream, and the manner in which she had come out into the night, a lovely confusion sent the blushes into her face. He kissed her until they grew deeper, and she hid her face on his neck.

And then she whispered something, with her face still against his shoulder, that drove the hot blood into his own cheeks.

"You are my husband, John, and I don't suppose I should be ashamed to let you see me in my bare feet. But, John—you *have* made me feel that way, and I am—your wife!"

He held her head close against him so that she could not see his face.

"I wanted to show you—that I loved you—that much," he said, scarcely knowing what words he was speaking. "Joanne, my darling——"

A soft hand closed his lips.

"I know, John," she interrupted him softly. "And I love you so for it, and I'm so proud of you—oh, so proud, John!"

He was glad that MacDonald came crashing through the

bush then. Joanne slipped from his arms and ran into the tepee.

In MacDonald's face was a grim and sullen look.

"You missed your chance, all right, Johnny," he growled. "I found where a horse was tied out there. The tracks lead to a big slide of rock that opens a break in the west range. Whoever it was has beat it back into the other valley. I can't understand, s'elp me God, I can't, Johnny! Why should FitzHugh come over into this valley alone? And he *rode* over! I'd say the devil couldn't do that!"

He said nothing more, but went out to lead in the hobbled horses, leaving Aldous in half-stunned wonderment to finish the preparation of breakfast. Joanne reappeared a little later, and helped him. It was six o'clock before breakfast was over and they were ready to begin their day's journey. As they were throwing the hitch over the last pack, MacDonald said in a low voice to Aldous:

"Everything may happen to-day, Johnny. I figger we'll reach the end by sundown. An' what don't happen there may happen along the trail. Keep a rifle-shot behind with Joanne. If there's onexpected shooting, we want what you might call a reserve force in the rear. I figger I can see danger, if there is any, an' I can do it best alone."

Aldous knew that in these last hours Donald MacDonald's judgment must be final, and he made no objection to an arrangement which seemed to place the old hunter under a more hazardous risk than his own. And he realized fully that these were the last hours. For the first time he had seen MacDonald fill his pockets with the

finger-long cartridges for his rifle, and he had noted how carefully he had looked at the breech of that rifle. Without questioning, he had followed the mountaineer's example. There were fifty spare cartridges in his own pockets. His .303 was freshly cleaned and oiled. He had tested the mechanism of his automatic. MacDonald had watched him, and both understood what such preparations meant as they set out on this last day's journey into the North. They had not kept from Joanne the fact that they would reach the end before night, and as they rode the prescribed distance behind the old hunter Aldous wondered how much she guessed, and what she knew. They had given her to understand that they were beating out the rival party, but he believed that in spite of all their efforts there was in Joanne's mind a comprehension which she did not reveal in voice or look. To-day she was no different than yesterday, or the day before, except that her cheeks were not so deeply flushed, and there was an uneasy questing in her eyes. He believed that she sensed the nearness of tragedy, that she was conscious of what they were now trying to hide from her, and that she did not speak because she knew that he and MacDonald did not want her to know. His heart throbbed with pride. Her courage inspired him. And he noticed that she rode closer to him—always at his side through that day.

Early in the afternoon MacDonald stopped on the crest of a swell in the valley and waited for them. When they came up he was facing the north. He did not look at them. For a few moments he did not speak. His hat was pulled low, and his beard was twitching.

They looked ahead. At their feet the valley broadened until it was a mile in width. Half a mile away a band of caribou were running for the cover of a parklike clump of timber. MacDonald did not seem to notice them. He was still looking steadily, and he was gazing at a mountain. It was a tremendous mountain, a terrible-looking, ugly mountain, perhaps three miles away. Aldous had never seen another like it. Its two huge shoulders were of almost ebon blackness, and glistened in the sunlight as if smeared with oil. Between those two shoulders rose a cathedral-like spire of rock and snow that seemed to tip the white fleece of the clouds.

MacDonald did not turn when he spoke. His voice was deep and vibrant with an intense emotion. Yet he was not excited.

"I've been hunting for that mount'in for forty years, Johnny!"

"Mac!"

Aldous leaned over and laid a hand on the old mountaineer's shoulder. Still MacDonald did not look at him.

"Forty years," he repeated, as if speaking to himself. "I see how I missed it now, just as DeBar said. I hunted from the west, an' on that side the mount'in ain't black. We must have crossed this valley an' come in from the east forty years ago, Johnny——"

He turned now, and what Joanne and Aldous saw in his face was not grief; it was not the sorrow of one drawing near to his beloved dead, but a joy that had transfigured him. The fire and strength of the youth in which he had first looked upon this valley with Jane at his side burned again in the sunken eyes of Donald MacDonald. After

forty years he had come into his own. Somewhere very near was the cavern with the soft white floor of sand, and for a moment Aldous fancied that he could hear the beating of MacDonald's heart, while from Joanne's tender bosom there rose a deep, sobbing breath of understanding.

And MacDonald, facing the mountain again, pointed with a long, gaunt arm, and said:

"We're almost there, Johnny. God ha' mercy on them if they've beat us out!"

CHAPTER XXVI

THEY rode on into the Valley of Gold. Again MacDonald took the lead, and he rode straight into the face of the black mountain. Aldous no longer made an effort to keep Joanne in ignorance of what might be ahead of them. He put a sixth cartridge into the chamber of his rifle, and carried the weapon across the pommel of his saddle. He explained to her now why they were riding behind—that if their enemies were laying in wait for them, MacDonald, alone, could make a swift retreat. Joanne asked no questions. Her lips were set tight. She was pale.

At the end of three quarters of an hour it seemed to them that MacDonald was riding directly into the face of a wall of rock. Then he swung sharply to the left, and disappeared. When they came to the point where he had turned they found that he had entered a concealed break in the mountain—a chasm with walls that rose almost perpendicular for a thousand feet above their heads. A dark and solemn gloom pervaded this chasm, and Aldous drew nearer to MacDonald, his rifle held in readiness, and his bridle-rein fastened to his saddle-horn. The chasm was short. Sunlight burst upon them suddenly, and a few minutes later MacDonald waited for them again.

Even Aldous could not restrain an exclamation of sur-

prise when he rode up with Joanne. Under them was another valley, a wide-sweeping valley between two rugged ranges that ran to the southwest. Up out of it there came to their ears a steady, rumbling roar; the air was filled with that roar; the earth seemed to tremble with it under their feet—and yet it was not loud. It came sullenly, as if from a great distance.

And then they saw that MacDonald was not looking out over the sweep of the valley, but down. Half a mile under them there was a dip—a valley within a valley—and through it ran the silver sheen of a stream. MacDonald spoke no word now. He dismounted and levelled his long telescope at the little valley. Aldous helped Joanne from her horse, and they waited. A great breath came at last from the old hunter. Slowly he turned. He did not give the telescope to Aldous, but to Joanne. She looked. For a full minute she seemed scarcely to breathe. Her hands trembled when she turned to give the glass to Aldous.

"I see—log cabins!" she whispered.

MacDonald placed a detaining hand on her arm.

"Look ag'in—Joanne," he said in a low voice that had in it a curious quiver.

Again she raised the telescope to her eyes.

"You see the little cabin—nearest the river?" whispered Donald.

"Yes, I see it."

"That was our cabin—Jane's an' mine—forty years ago," he said, and now his voice was husky.

Joanne's breath broke sobbingly as she gave Aldous the glass. Something seemed to choke him as he looked

down upon the scene of the grim tragedy in which Donald MacDonald and Jane had played their fatal part. He saw the cabins as they had stood for nearly half a century. There were four. Three of them were small, and the fourth was large. They might have been built yesterday, for all that he could see of ruin or decay. The doors and windows of the larger cabin and two of the smaller ones were closed. The roofs were unbroken. The walls appeared solid. Twice he looked at the fourth cabin, with its wide-open door and window, and twice he looked at the cabin nearest the stream, where had lived Donald MacDonald and Jane.

Donald had moved, and Joanne was watching him tensely, when he took the glass from his eyes. Mutely the old mountaineer held out a hand, and Aldous gave him the telescope. Crouching behind a rock he slowly swept the valley. For half an hour he looked through the glass, and in that time scarce a word was spoken. During the last five minutes of that half-hour both Joanne and Aldous knew that MacDonald was looking at the little cabin nearest the stream, and with hands clasped tightly they waited in silence.

At last old Donald rose, and his face and voice were filled with a wonderful calm.

"There ain't been no change," he said softly. "I can see the log in front o' the door that I used to cut kindling on. It was too tough for them to split an' burn after we left. An' I can see the tub I made out o' spruce for Jane. It's leaning next the door, where I put it the day before we went away. Forty years ain't very long, Johnny! It ain't very long!"

Joanne had turned from them, and Aldous knew that she was crying.

"An' we've beat 'em to it, Johnny—we've beat 'em to it!" exulted MacDonald. "There ain't a sign of life in the valley, and we sure could make it out from here if there was!"

He climbed into his saddle, and started down the slope of the mountain. Aldous went to Joanne. She was sobbing. Her eyes were blinded by tears.

"It's terrible, terrible," she whispered brokenly. "And it—it's beautiful, John. I feel as though I'd like to give my life—to bring Jane back!"

"You must not betray tears or grief to Donald," said Aldous, drawing her close in his arms for a moment. "Joanne—sweetheart—it is a wonderful thing that is happening with him! I dreaded this day—I have dreaded it for a long time. I thought that it would be terrible to witness the grief of a man with a heart like Donald's. But he is not filled with grief, Joanne. It is joy, a great happiness that perhaps neither you nor I can understand —that has come to him now. Don't you understand? He has found her. He has found their old home. To-day is the culmination of forty years of hope, and faith, and prayer. And it does not bring him sorrow, but gladness. We must rejoice with him. We must be happy with him. I love you, Joanne. I love you above all else on earth or in heaven. Without you I would not want to live. And yet, Joanne, I believe that I am no happier to-day than is Donald MacDonald!"

With a sudden cry Joanne flung her arms about his neck. "John, is it *that?*" she cried, and joy shone through her

tears. "Yes, yes, I understand now! His heart is not breaking. It is life returning into a heart that was empty. I understand—oh, I understand now! And we must be happy with him. We must be happy when we find the cavern—and Jane!"

"And when we go down there to the little cabin that was their home."

"Yes—yes!"

They followed behind MacDonald. After a little a spur of the mountain-side shut out the little valley from them, and when they rounded this they found themselves very near to the cabins. They rode down a beautiful slope into the basin, and when he reached the log buildings old Donald stopped and dismounted. Again Aldous helped Joanne from her horse. Ahead of them MacDonald went to the cabin nearest the stream. At the door he paused and waited for them.

"Forty years!" he said, facing them. "An' there ain't been so very much change as I can see!"

Years had dropped from his shoulders in these last few minutes, and even Aldous could not keep quite out of his face his amazement and wonder. Very gently Donald put his hand to the latch, as though fearing to awaken some one within; and very gently he pressed down on it, and put a bit of his strength against the door. It moved inward, and when it had opened sufficiently he leaned forward so that his head and a half of his shoulders were inside; and he looked—a long time he looked, without a movement of his body or a breath that they could see.

And then he turned to them again, and his eyes were shining as they had never seen them shine before.

"I'll open the window," he said. "It's dark—dark inside."

He went to the window, which was closed with a sapling barricade that had swung on hinges; and when he swung it back the rusted hinges gave way, and the thing crashed down at his feet. And now through the open window the sun poured in a warm radiance, and Donald entered the cabin, with Joanne and Aldous close behind him.

There was not much in the cabin, but what it held was earth, and heaven, and all else to Donald MacDonald. A strange, glad cry surged from his chest as he looked about him, and now Joanne saw and understood what John Aldous had told her—for Donald MacDonald, after forty years, had come back to his home!

"Oh, my Gawd, Johnny, they didn't touch anything! They didn't touch anything!" he breathed in ecstasy. "I thought after we ran away they'd come in——"

He broke off, and his hat dropped from his hand, and he stood and stared; and what he was looking at, the sun fell upon in a great golden splash, and Joanne's hand gripped John's, and held to it tightly. Against the wall, hanging as they had hung for forty years, were a woman's garments: a hood, a shawl, a dress, and an apron that was half in tatters; and on the floor under these things were *a pair of shoes.* And as Donald MacDonald went to them, his arms reaching out, his lips moving, forgetful of all things but that he had come home, and Jane was here, Joanne drew Aldous softly to the door, and they went out into the day.

Joanne did not speak, and Aldous did not urge her. He saw her white throat throbbing as if there were a little

heart beating there, and her eyes were big and dark and velvety, like the eyes of a fawn that had been frightened. There was a thickness in his own throat, and he found that it was difficult for him to see far out over the plain. They waited near the horses. Fifty yards from them ran the stream; a clear, beautiful stream which flowed in the direction from which the mysterious rumble of thunder seemed to come. This, Aldous knew, was the stream of gold. In the sand he saw wreckage which he knew were the ancient rockers; a shovel, thrust shaft-deep, still remained where it had last been planted.

Perhaps for ten minutes Donald MacDonald remained in the cabin. Then he came out. Very carefully he closed the door. His shoulders were thrown back. His head was held high. He looked like a monarch.

And his voice was calm.

"Everything is there, Johnny—everything but the gold," he said. "They took that."

Now he spoke to Joanne.

"You better not go with us into the other cabins," he said.

"Why?" she asked softly.

"Because—there's death in them all."

"I am going," she said.

From the window of the largest cabin MacDonald pulled the sapling shutter, and, like the other, it fell at his feet. Then they opened the door, and entered; and here the sunlight revealed the cabin's ghastly tragedy. The first thing that they saw, because it was most terrible, was a rough table, half over which lay the shrunken thing that had once been a man. A part of its clothes still remained,

but the head had broken from its column, and the white and fleshless skull lay facing them. Out of tattered and dust-crumbling sleeves reached the naked bones of hands and arms. And on the floor lay another of these things, in a crumpled and huddled heap, only the back of the skull showing, like the polished pate of a bald man. These things they saw first, and then two others: on the table were a heap of age-blackened and dusty sacks, and out of the back of the crumbling thing that guarded them stuck the long buckhorn hilt of a knife.

"They must ha' died fighting," said MacDonald. "An' there, Johnny, is their gold!"

White as death Joanne stood in the door and watched them. MacDonald and Aldous went to the sacks. They were of buckskin. The years had not aged them. When Aldous took one in his hands he found that it was heavier than lead. With his knife MacDonald cut a slit in one of them, and the sun that came through the window flashed in a little golden stream that ran from the bag.

"We'll take them out and put 'em in a pannier," said MacDonald. "The others won't be far behind us, Johnny."

Between them they carried out the seven sacks of gold. It was a load for their arms. They put it in one of the panniers, and then MacDonald nodded toward the cabin next the one that had been his own.

"I wouldn't go in there, Joanne," he said.

"I'm going," she whispered again.

"It was *their* cabin—the man an' his wife," persisted old Donald. "An' the men was beasts, Joanne! I don't know what happened in there—but I guess."

"I'm going," she said again.

MacDonald pulled down the barricade from the window —a window that also faced the south and west, and this time he had to thrust against the door with his shoulder. They entered, and now a cry came from Joanne's lips—a cry that had in it horror, disbelief, a woman's wrath. Against the wall was a pile of something, and on that pile was the searching first light of day that had fallen upon it for nearly half a century. The pile was a man crumpled down; across it, her skeleton arms thrown about it protectingly, was a woman. This time Aldous did not go forward. MacDonald was alone, and Aldous took Joanne from the cabin, and held her while she swayed in his arms. Donald came out a little later, and there was a curious look of exultation and triumph in his face.

"She killed herself," he said. "That was her husband. I know him. I gave him the rock-nails he put in the soles of his boots—and the nails are still there."

He went alone into the remaining two cabins, while Aldous stood with Joanne. He did not stay long. From the fourth cabin he brought an armful of the little brown sacks. He returned, and brought a second armful.

"There's three more in that last cabin," he explained. "Two men, an' a woman. She must ha' been the wife of the man they killed. They were the last to live, an' they starved to death. An' now, Johnny——"

He paused, and he drew in a great breath.

He was looking to the west, where the sun was beginning to sink behind the mountains.

"An' now, Johnny, if you're ready, an' if Joanne is ready, we'll go," he said.

CHAPTER XXVII

AS THEY went up out of the basin into the broad meadows of the larger valley, MacDonald rode between Aldous and Joanne, and the pack-horses, led by Pinto, trailed behind.

Again old Donald said, as he searched the valley:

"We've beat 'em, Johnny. Quade an' Rann are coming up on the other side of the range, and I figger they're just about a day behind—mebby only hours, or an hour. You can't tell. There's more gold back there. We got about a hunderd pounds in them fifteen sacks, an' there was twice that much. It's hid somewhere. Calkins used to keep his'n under the floor. So did Watts. We'll find it later. An' the river, an' the dry gulches on both sides of the valley—they're full of it! It's all gold, Johnny—gold everywhere!"

He pointed ahead to where the valley rose in a green slope between two mountains half a mile away.

"That's the break," he said. "It don't seem very far now, do it, Joanne?" His silence seemed to have dropped from him like a mantle, and there was joy in what he was telling. "But it was a distance that night—a turrible distance," he continued, before she could answer. "That was forty-one years ago, coming November. An' it was cold, an' the snow was deep. It was bitter cold—so cold it caught my Jane's lungs, an' that was what made her

go a little later. The slope up there don't look steep now, but it was steep then—with two feet of snow to drag ourselves through. I don't think the cavern is more'n five or six miles away, Johnny, mebby less, an' it took us twenty hours to reach it. It snowed so heavy that night, an' the wind blowed so, that our trail was filled up or they might ha' followed."

Many times Aldous had been on the point of asking old Donald a question. For the first time he asked it now, even as his eyes swept slowly and searchingly over the valley for signs of Mortimer FitzHugh and Quade.

"I've often wondered why you ran away with Jane," he said. "I know what threatened her—a thing worse than death. But why did you run? Why didn't you stay and fight?"

A low growl rumbled in MacDonald's beard.

"Johnny, Johnny, if I only ha' could!" he groaned. "There was five of them left when I ran into the cabin an' barricaded myself there with Jane. I stuck my gun out of the window an' they was afraid to rush the cabin. They was *afraid*, Johnny, all that afternoon—*an' I didn't have a cartridge left to fire!* That's why we went just as soon as we could crawl out in the dark. I knew they'd come that night. I might ha' killed one or two hand to hand, for I was big an' strong in them days, Johnny, but I knew I couldn't beat 'em all. So we went."

"After all, death isn't so very terrible," said Joanne softly, and she was riding so close that for a moment she laid one of her warm hands on Donald MacDonald's.

"No, it's sometimes—wunnerful—an' beautiful," re-

plied Donald, a little brokenly, and with that he rode ahead, and Joanne and Aldous waited until the pack-horses had passed them.

"He's going to see that all is clear at the summit," explained Aldous.

They seemed to be riding now right into the face of that mysterious rumble and roar of the mountains. It was an hour before they all stood together at the top of the break, and here MacDonald swung sharply to the right, and came soon to the rock-strewn bed of a dried-up stream that in ages past had been a wide and rushing torrent. Steadily, as they progressed down this, the rumble and roar grew nearer. It seemed that it was almost under their feet, when again MacDonald turned, and a quarter of an hour later they found themselves at the edge of a small plain; and now all about them were cold and towering mountains that shut out the sun, and a hundred yards to their right was a great dark cleft in the floor of the plain, and up out of this came the rumble and roar that was like the sullen anger of monster beasts imprisoned deep down in the bowels of the earth.

MacDonald got off his horse, and Aldous and Joanne rode up to him. In the old man's face was a look of joy and triumph.

"It weren't so far as I thought it was, Johnny!" he cried. "Oh, it must ha' been a turrible night—a turrible night when Jane an' I come this way! It took us twenty hours, Johnny!"

"We are near the cavern?" breathed Joanne.

"It ain't more'n half a mile farther on, I guess. But we'll camp here. We're pretty well hid. They can't

find us. An' from that summit up there we can keep watch in both valleys."

Knowing the thoughts that were in MacDonald's mind, and how full his heart was with a great desire, Aldous went to him when they had dismounted.

"You go on alone if there is time to-night, Mac," he said, knowing that the other would understand him. "I will make camp."

"There ain't no one in the valley," mused the old man, a little doubtfully at first. "It would be safe—quite safe, Johnny."

"Yes, it will be safe."

"And I will stand guard while John is working," said Joanne, who had come to them. "No one can approach us without being seen."

For another moment MacDonald hesitated. Then he said:

"Do you see that break over there across the plain? It's the open to a gorge. Johnny, it do seem onreasonable—it do seem as though I must ha' been dreamin'—when I think that it took us twenty hours! But the snow was to my waist in this plain, an' it was slow work—turrible slow work! I think the cavern—ain't on'y a little way up that gorge."

"You can make it before the sun is quite gone."

"An' I could hear you shout, or your gun. I could ride back in five minutes—an' I wouldn't be gone an hour."

"There is no danger," urged Aldous.

A deep breath came from old Donald's breast.

"I guess—I'll go, Johnny, if you an' Joanne don't mind."

He looked about him, and then he pointed toward the face of a great rock.

"Put the tepee up near that," he said. "Pile the saddles, an' the blankets, an' the panniers around it, so it'll look like a real camp, Johnny. But it won't be a real camp. It'll be a dummy. See them thick spruce an' cedar over there? Build Joanne a shelter of boughs in there, an' take in some grub, an' blankets, an' the gold. See the point, Johnny? If anything should happen——"

"They'd tackle the bogus camp!" cried Aldous with elation. "It's a splendid idea!"

He set at once about unpacking the horses, and Joanne followed close at his side to help him. MacDonald mounted his horse and rode at a trot in the direction of the break in the mountain.

The sun had disappeared, but its reflection was still on the peaks; and after he had stripped and hobbled the horses Aldous took advantage of the last of day to scrutinize the plain and the mountain slopes through the telescope. After that he found enough dry poles with which to set up the tepee, and about this he scattered the saddles and panniers, as MacDonald had suggested. Then he cleared a space in the thick spruce, and brought to it what was required for their hidden camp.

It was almost dark when he completed the spruce and cedar lean-to for Joanne. He knew that to-night they must build no fire, not even for tea; and when they had laid out the materials for their cold supper, which consisted of beans, canned beef and tongue, peach marmalade, bread bannock, and pickles and cheese, he went with Joanne for water to a small creek they had crossed a

hundred yards away. In both his hands, ready for instant action, he carried his rifle. Joanne carried the pail. Her eyes were big and bright and searching in that thick-growing dusk of night. She walked very close to Aldous, and she said:

"John, I know how careful you and Donald have been in this journey into the North. I know what you have feared. Culver Rann and Quade are after the gold, and they are near. But why does Donald talk as though we are *surely* going to be attacked by them, or are *surely* going to attack them? I don't understand it, John. If you don't care for the gold so much, as you told me once, and if we find Jane to-morrow, or to-night, why do we remain to have trouble with Quade and Culver Rann? Tell me, John."

He could not see her face fully in the gloom, and he was glad that she could not see his.

"If we can get away without fighting, we will, Joanne," he lied. And he knew that she would have known that he was lying if it had not been for the darkness.

"You won't fight—over the gold?" she asked, pressing his arm. "Will you promise me that, John?"

"Yes, I promise that. I swear it!" he cried, and so forcefully that she gave a glad little laugh.

"Then if they don't find us to-morrow, we'll go back home?" She trembled, and he knew that her heart was filled with a sudden lightness. "And I don't believe they will find us. They won't come beyond that terrible place—and the gold! Why should they, John? Why should they follow us—if we leave them everything? Oh-h-h-h!" She shuddered, and whispered: "I wish we

had not brought the gold, John. I wish we had left it behind!"

"What we have is worth thirty or forty thousand dollars," he said reassuringly, as he filled his pail with water and they began to return. "We can do a great deal of good with that. Endowments, for instance," he laughed.

As he spoke, they both stopped, and listened. Plainly they heard the approaching thud of hoofs. MacDonald had been gone nearer two hours than one, and believing that it was him, Aldous gave the owl signal. The signal floated back to them softly. Five minutes later MacDonald rode up and dismounted. Until he had taken the saddle off, and had hobbled his horse, he did not speak. Neither Joanne nor Aldous asked the question that was in their hearts. But even in the darkness they felt something. It was as if not only the torrent rushing through the chasm, but MacDonald's heart as well, was charging the air with a strange and subdued excitement. And when MacDonald spoke, that which they had felt was in his voice.

"You ain't seen or heard anything, Johnny?"

"Nothing. . And you—Donald?"

In the darkness, Joanne went to the old man, and her hand found one of his, and clasped it tightly; and she found that Donald MacDonald's big hand was trembling in a strange and curious way, and she could feel him quivering.

"You found Jane?" she whispered.

"Yes, I found her, little Joanne."

She did not let go of his hand until they entered the open space which Aldous had made in the spruce. Then she remembered what Aldous had said to her earlier in the day, and cheerfully she lighted the two candles they

had set out, and forced Aldous down first upon the ground, and then MacDonald, and began to help them to beans and meat and bannock, while all the time her heart was crying out to know about the cavern—and Jane. The candle-glow told her a great deal, for in it Donald MacDonald's face was very calm, and filled with a great peace, despite the trembling she had felt. Her woman's sympathy told her that his heart was too full on this night for speech, and when he ate but little she did not urge him to eat more; and when he rose and went silently and alone out into the darkness she held Aldous back; and when, still a little later, she went into her nest for the night, she whispered softly to him:

"I know that he found Jane as he wanted to find her, and he is happy. I think he has gone out there alone—to cry." And for a time after that, as he sat in the gloom, John Aldous knew that Joanne was sobbing like a little child in the spruce and cedar shelter he had built for her.

CHAPTER XXVIII

IF MacDONALD slept at all that night Aldous did not know it. The old mountaineer watched until a little after twelve in the deep shadow of a rock between the two camps.

"I can't sleep," he protested, when Aldous urged him to take his rest. "I might take a little stroll up the plain, Johnny—but I can't sleep."

The plain lay in a brilliant starlight at this hour; they could see the gleam of the snow-peaks—the light was almost like the glow of the moon.

"There'll be plenty of sleep after to-morrow," added MacDonald, and there was a finality in his voice and words which set the other's blood stirring.

"You think they will show up to-morrow?"

"Yes. This is the same valley the cabins are in, Johnny. That big mountain runs out an' splits it, an' it curves like a horseshoe. From that mount'in we can see them, no matter which way they come. They'll go straight to the cabins. There's a deep little run under the slope. You didn't see it when we came out, but it'll take us within a hunderd yards of 'em. An' at a hunderd yards——"

He shrugged his shoulders suggestively in the starlight, and there was a smile on his face.

"It seems almost like murder," shuddered Aldous.

"But it ain't," replied MacDonald quickly. "It's

self-defence! If we don't do it, Johnny—if we don't draw on them first, what happened there forty years ago is goin' to happen again—with Joanne!"

"A hundred yards," breathed Aldous, his jaws setting hard. "And there are five!"

"They'll go into the cabins," said MacDonald. "At some time there will be two or three outside, an' we'll take them first. At the sound of the shots the others will run out, and it will be easy. Yo' can't very well miss a man at a hunderd yards, Johnny?"

"No, I won't miss."

MacDonald rose.

"I'm goin' to take a little stroll, Johnny."

For two hours after that Aldous was alone. He knew why old Donald could not sleep, and where he had gone, and he pictured him sitting before the little old cabin in the starlit valley communing with the spirit of Jane. And during those two hours he steeled himself for the last time to the thing that was going to happen when the day came.

It was nearly three o'clock when MacDonald returned. It was four o'clock before he roused Joanne; and it was five o'clock when they had eaten their breakfast, and MacDonald prepared to leave for the mountain with his telescope. Aldous had observed Joanne talking to him for several minutes alone, and he had also observed that her eyes were very bright, and that there was an unusual eagerness in her manner of listening to what the old man was saying. The significance of this did not occur to him when she urged him to accompany MacDonald.

"Two pairs of eyes are better than one, John," she said,

"and I cannot possibly be in danger here. I can see you all the time, and you can see me—if I don't run away, or hide." And she laughed a little breathlessly. "There is no danger, is there, Donald?"

The old hunter shook his head.

"There's no danger, but—you might be lonesome," he said.

Joanne put her pretty mouth close to Aldous' ear.

"I want to be alone for a little while, dear," she whispered, and there was that mystery in her voice which kept him from questioning her, and made him go with MacDonald.

In three quarters of an hour they had reached the spur of the mountain from which MacDonald had said they could see up the valley, and also the break through which they had come the preceding afternoon. The morning mists still hung low, but as these melted away under the sun mile after mile of a marvellous panorama spread out swiftly under them, and as the distance of their vision grew, the deeper became the disappointment in MacDonald's face. For half an hour after the mists had gone he neither spoke nor lowered the telescope from his eyes. A mile away Aldous saw three caribou crossing the valley. A little later, on a green slope, he discerned a moving hulk that he knew was a bear. He did not speak until old Donald lowered the glass.

"I can see for eight miles up the valley, an' there ain't a soul in sight," said MacDonald in answer to his question. "I figgered they'd be along about now, Johnny."

A dozen times Aldous had looked back at the camp. Twice he had seen Joanne. He looked now through the

telescope. She was nowhere in sight. A bit nervously he returned the telescope to MacDonald.

"And I can't see Joanne," he said.

MacDonald looked. For five minutes he levelled the glass steadily at the camp. Then he shifted it slowly westward, and a low exclamation broke from his lips as he lowered the glass, and looked at Aldous.

"Johnny, she's just goin' into the gorge! She was jus' disappearin' when I caught her!"

"Going into—the gorge!" gasped Aldous, jumping to his feet. "Mac——"

MacDonald rose and stood at his side. There was something reassuring in the rumbling laugh that came from deep in his chest.

"She's beat us!" he chuckled. "Bless her, she's beat us! I didn't guess why she was askin' me all them questions. An' I told her, Johnny—told her just where the cavern was up there in the gorge, an' how you wouldn't hardly miss it if you tried. An' she asked me how long it would take to *walk* there, an' I told her half an hour. An' she's going to the cavern, Johnny!"

He was telescoping his long glass as he spoke, and while Aldous was still staring toward the gorge in wonderment and a little fear, he added:

"We'd better follow. Quade an' Rann can't get here inside o' two or three hours, an' we'll be back before then." Again he rumbled with that curious chuckling laugh. "She beat us, Johnny, she beat us fair! An' she's got spirrit, a wunnerful spirrit, to go up there alone!"

Aldous wanted to run, but he held himself down to MacDonald's stride. His heart trembled apprehensively

as they hurriedly descended the mountain and cut across the plain. He could not quite bring himself to MacDonald's point of assurance regarding Quade and Mortimer FitzHugh. The old mountaineer was positive that the other party was behind them. Aldous asked himself if it were not possible that Quade and FitzHugh were *ahead* of them, and already waiting and watching for their opportunity. He had suggested that they might have swung farther to the west, with the plan of descending upon the valley from the north, and MacDonald had pointed out how unlikely this was. In spite of this, Aldous was not in a comfortable frame of mind as they hurried after Joanne. She had half an hour's start of them when they reached the mouth of the gorge, and not until they had travelled another half-hour up the rough bed of the break between the two mountains, and MacDonald pointed ahead, and said: "There's the cavern!" did he breathe easier.

They could see the mouth of the cavern when they were yet a couple of hundred yards from it. It was a wide, low cleft in the north face of the chasm wall, and in front of it, spreading out like the flow of a stream, was a great spatter of white sand, like a huge rug that had been spread out in a space cleared of its chaotic litter of rock and broken slate. At first glance Aldous guessed that the cavern had once been the exit of a subterranean stream. The sand deadened the sound of their footsteps as they approached. At the mouth of the cave they paused. It was perhaps forty or fifty feet deep, and as high as a nine-foot room. Inside it was quite light. Halfway to the back of it, upon her knees, and with her face turned from them, was Joanne.

They were very close to her before she heard them. With a startled cry she sprang to her feet, and Aldous and MacDonald saw what she had been doing. Over a long mound in the white sand still rose the sapling stake which Donald had planted there forty years before; and about this, and scattered over the grave, were dozens of wild asters and purple hyacinths which Joanne had brought from the plain. Aldous did not speak, but he took her hand, and looked down with her on the grave. And then something caught his eyes among the flowers, and Joanne drew him a step nearer, her eyes shining like velvet stars, while his heart beat faster when he saw what the object was. It was a book, open in the middle, and it lay face downward on the grave. It was old, and looked as though it might have fallen into dust at the touch of his finger. Joanne's voice was low and filled with a whispering awe.

"It was her Bible, John!"

He turned a little, and noticed that Donald had gone to the mouth of the cavern, and was looking toward the mountain.

"It was her Bible," he heard Joanne repeating; and then MacDonald turned toward them, and he saw in his face a look that seemed strange and out of place in this home of his dead. He went to him, and Joanne followed.

MacDonald had turned again—was listening—and holding his breath. Then he said, still with his face toward the mountain and the valley:

"I may be mistaken, Johnny, but I think I heard—a rifle-shot!"

For a full minute they listened.

"It seemed off there," said MacDonald, pointing to

the south. "I guess we'd better get back to camp, Johnny."

He started ahead of them, and Aldous followed as swiftly as he could with Joanne. She was panting with excitement, but she asked no questions. MacDonald began to spring more quickly from rock to rock; over the level spaces he began to run. He reached the edge of the plain four or five hundred yards in advance of them, and was scanning the valley through his telescope when they came up.

"They're not on this side," he said. "They're comin' up the other leg of the valley, Johnny. We've got to get to the mount'in before we can see them."

He closed the glass with a snap and swung it over his shoulder. Then he pointed toward the camp.

"Take Joanne down there," he commanded. "Watch the break we came through, an' wait for me. I'm goin' up on the mount'in an' take a look!"

The last words came back over his shoulder as he started on a trot down the slope. Only once before had Aldous seen MacDonald employ greater haste, and that was on the night of the attack on Joanne. He was convinced there was no doubt in Donald's mind about the rifle-shot, and that the shot could mean but one thing—the nearness of Mortimer FitzHugh and Quade. Why they should reveal their presence in that way he did not ask himself as he hurried down into the plain with Joanne. By the time they reached the camp old Donald had covered two thirds of the distance to the mountain. Aldous looked at his watch and a curious thrill shot through him. Only a little more than an hour had passed since they had left

the mountain to follow Joanne, and in that time it would have been impossible for their enemies to have covered more than a third of the eight-mile stretch of valley which they had found empty of human life under the searching scrutiny of the telescope! He was right—and MacDonald was wrong! The sound of the shot, if there had been a shot, must have come from some other direction!

He wanted to shout his warning to MacDonald, but already too great a distance separated them. Besides, if he was right, MacDonald would run into no danger in that direction. Their menace was to the north—beyond the chasm out of which came the rumble and roar of the stream. When Donald had disappeared up the slope he looked more closely at the rugged walls of rock that shut them in on that side. He could see no break in them. His eyes followed the dark streak in the floor of the plain, which was the chasm. It was two hundred yards below where they were standing; and a hundred yards beyond the tepee he saw where it came out of a great rent in the mountain. He looked at Joanne. She had been watching him, and was breathing quickly.

"While Donald is taking his look from the mountain, I'm going to investigate the chasm," he said.

She followed him, a few steps behind. The roar grew in their ears as they advanced. After a little solid rock replaced the earth under their feet, and twenty paces from the precipice Aldous took Joanne by the hand. They went to the edge and looked over. Fifty feet below them the stream was caught in the narrow space between the two chasm walls, and above the rush and roar of it Aldous heard the startled cry that came from Joanne.

She clutched his hand fiercely. Fascinated she gazed down. The water, speeding like a millrace, was a lather of foam; and up through this foam there shot the crests of great rocks, as though huge monsters of some kind were at play, whipping the torrent into greater fury, and bellowing forth thunderous voices. Downstream Aldous could see that the tumult grew less; from the rent in the mountain came the deeper, more distant-rolling thunder that they had heard on the other side of the range. And then, as he looked, a sharper cry broke from Joanne, and she dragged him back from the ledge, and pointed toward the tepee.

Out from among the rocks had appeared a human figure. It was a woman. Her hair was streaming wildly about her, and in the sun it was black as a crow's wing. She rushed to the tepee, opened the flap, and looked in. Then she turned, and a cry that was almost a scream rang from her lips. In another moment she had seen Aldous and Joanne, and was running toward them. They advanced to meet her. Suddenly Aldous stopped, and with a sharp warning to Joanne he threw his rifle half to his shoulder, and faced the rocks from which the speeding figure had come. In that same instant they both recognized her. It was Marie, the woman who had ridden the bear at Tête Jaune, and with whom Mortimer FitzHugh had bought Joe DeBar!

She staggered up to them, panting, exhausted, her breath coming in gulping sobs. For a moment she could not speak. Her dress was torn; her waist was ripped so that it exposed her throat and shoulder; and the front of the waist and her face were stained with blood. Her black

eyes shone like a madwoman's. Fiercely she fought to get her breath, and all the time she clung to Joanne, and looked at Aldous. She pointed toward the rocks—the chaotic upheaval that lay between the tepee and the chasm —and words broke gaspingly from her lips.

"They're coming!—coming!" she cried. "They killed Joe—murdered him—and they're coming—to kill you!" She clutched a hand to her breast, and then pointed with it to the mountain where MacDonald had gone. "They saw him go—and they sent two men to kill him; and the rest are coming through the rocks!" She turned sobbingly to Joanne. "They killed Joe," she moaned. "They killed Joe, and they're coming—for *you!*"

The emphasis on that final word struck like a blow in the ears of John Aldous.

"Run for the spruce!" he commanded. "Joanne, run!"

Marie had crumpled down in a moaning heap at Joanne's feet, and sat swaying with her face in her hands.

"They killed him—they murdered my Joe!" she was sobbing. "And it was my fault—my fault! I trapped him! I sold him! And, oh, my God, I loved him—I loved him!"

"Run, Joanne!" commanded Aldous a second time. "Run for the spruce!"

Instead of obeying him, Joanne knelt down beside Marie.

He went to speak again, but there came an interruption —a thing that was like the cold touch of lead in his own heart. From up on the mountain where the old mountaineer had walked into the face of death there came the

sharp, splitting report of a rifle; and in that same instant it was followed by another and still a third—quick, stinging, whiplike reports—and he knew that not one of them had come from the gun of Donald MacDonald!

And then he saw that the rocks behind the tepee had become suddenly alive with men!

CHAPTER XXIX

SHEER amazement made Aldous hold his fire in that first moment. Marie had said that two men were after MacDonald. He had heard three shots nearly a mile away, and she was still sobbing that DeBar was dead. That accounted for *three*. He had expected to see only Quade, and FitzHugh, and one other behind the tepee. And there were six! He counted them as they came swiftly out from the shelter of the rocks to the level of the plain. He was about to fire when he thought of Joanne and Marie. They were still behind him, crouching upon the ground. To fire from where he stood would draw a fusillade of bullets in their direction, and with another warning cry to Joanne, he sped twenty paces to one side so that they would not be within range. Not until then did the attacking party see him.

At a hundred and fifty yards he had no time to pick out Quade or Mortimer FitzHugh. He fired first at a group of three, and one of the three crumpled down as though his skull had been crushed from above. A rifle spat back at him and the bullet sang like a ripping cloth close over his head. He dropped to his knees before he fired again, and a bullet clove the air where he had stood. The crack of rifles did not hurry him. He knew that he had six cartridges, and only six, and he aimed deliberately. At his second shot the man he had fired at ran forward three

or four steps, and then pitched flat on his face. For a flash Aldous thought that it was Mortimer FitzHugh. Then, along his gun barrel, he saw FitzHugh—and pulled the trigger. It was a miss.

Two men had dropped upon their knees and were aiming more carefully. He swung his sight to the foremost, and drove a bullet straight through his chest. The next moment something seemed to have fallen upon him with crushing weight. A red sea rose before his eyes. In it he was submerged; the roar of it filled his ears; it blinded him; and in the suffocating embrace of it he tried to cry out. He fought himself out of it, his eyes cleared, and he could see again. His rifle was no longer in his hands, and he was standing. Twenty feet away men were rushing upon him. His brain recovered itself with the swiftness of lightning. A bullet had stunned him, but he was not badly hurt. He jerked out his automatic, but before he could raise it, or even fire from his hip, the first of his assailants was upon him with a force that drove it from his hand. They went down together, and as they struggled on the bare rock Aldous caught for a fraction of a second a scene that burned itself like fire in his brain. He saw Mortimer FitzHugh with a revolver in his hand. He had stopped; he was staring like one looking upon the ghost of the dead, and as he stared there rose above the rumbling roar of the chasm a wild and terrible shriek from Joanne.

Aldous saw no more then. He was not fighting for his life, but for her, and he fought with the mad ferocity of a tiger. As he struck, and choked, and beat the head of his assailant on the rock, he heard shriek after shriek come

from Joanne's lips; and then for a flash he saw them again, and Joanne was struggling in the arms of Quade!

He struggled to his knees, and the man he was fighting struggled to his knees; and then they came to their feet, locked in a death-grip on the edge of the chasm. From Quade's clutch he saw Joanne staring at Mortimer FitzHugh; then her eyes shot to him, and with another shriek she fought to free herself.

For thirty seconds of that terrible drama Mortimer FitzHugh stood as if hewn out of rock. Then he sprang toward the fighters.

In the arms of John Aldous was the strength of ten men. He twisted the head of his antagonist under his arm; he braced his feet—in another moment he would have flung him bodily into the roaring maelstrom below. Even as his muscles gathered themselves for the final effort he knew that all was lost. Mortimer FitzHugh's face leered over his shoulder, his demoniac intention was in his eyes before he acted. With a cry of hatred and of triumph he shoved them both over the edge, and as Aldous plunged to the depths below, still holding to his enemy, he heard a last piercing scream from Joanne.

As the rock slid away from under his feet his first thought was that the end had come, and that no living creature could live in the roaring maelstrom of rock and flood into which he was plunging. But quicker than he dashed through space his mind worked. Instinctively, without time for reasoning, he gripped at the fact that his one chance lay in the close embrace of his enemy. He hung to him. It seemed to him that they turned over and over a hundred times in that distance of fifty feet. Then

a mass of twisting foam broke under him, and up out of it shot the head of one of the roaring monsters of rock that he and Joanne had looked upon. They struck it fairly, and Aldous was uppermost. He felt the terrific impact of the other's body. The foam boiled upward again, and they slipped off into the flood.

Still Aldous held to his enemy. He could feel that he was limp now; he no longer felt the touch of the hands that had choked him, or the embrace of the arms that had struggled with him. He believed that his antagonist was dead. The fifty-foot fall, with the rock splitting his back, had killed him. For a moment Aldous still clung to him as they sank together under the surface, torn and twisted by the whirling eddies and whirlpools. It seemed to him that they would never cease going down, that they were sinking a vast distance.

Dully he felt the beat of rocks. Then it flashed upon him that the dead man was sinking like a weighted thing. He freed himself. Fiercely he struggled to bring himself to the surface. It seemed an eternity before he rose to the top. He opened his mouth and drew a great gulp of air into his lungs. The next instant a great rock reared like a living thing in his face; he plunged against it, was beaten over it, and again he was going down—down—in that deadly clutch of maelstrom and undertow. Again he fought, and again he came to the surface. He saw a black, slippery wall gliding past him with the speed of an express train. And now it seemed as though a thousand clubs were beating him. Ahead of him were rocks—nothing but rocks.

He shot through them like a piece of driftwood. The

roaring in his ears grew less, and he felt the touch of something under his feet. Sunlight burst upon him. He caught at a rock, and hung to it. His eyes cleared a little. He was within ten feet of a shore covered with sand and gravel. The water was smooth and running with a musical ripple. Waist-deep he waded through it to the shore, and fell down upon his knees, with his face buried in his arms. He had been ten minutes in the death-grip of the chasm. It was another ten minutes before he staggered to his feet and looked about him.

His face was beaten until he was almost blind. His shirt had been torn from his shoulders and his flesh was bleeding. He advanced a few steps. He raised one arm and then the other. He limped. One arm hurt him when he moved it, but the bone was sound. He was terribly mauled, but he knew that no bones were broken, and a gasp of thankfulness fell from his lips. All this time his mind had been suffering even more than his body. Not for an instant, even as he fought for life between the chasm walls, and as he lay half unconscious on the rock, had he forgotten Joanne. His one thought was of her now. He had no weapon, but as he stumbled in the direction of the camp in the little plain he picked up a club that lay in his path.

That MacDonald was dead, Aldous was certain. There would be four against him—Quade and Mortimer FitzHugh and the two men who had gone to the mountain. His brain cleared swiftly as a part of his strength returned, and it occurred to him that if he lost no time he might come upon Joanne and her captors before the two men came from killing old Donald. He tried to run. Not

until then did he fully realize the condition he was in. Twice in the first hundred yards his legs doubled under him and he fell down among the rocks. He grew steadily stronger, though each time he tried to run or spring a distance of a few feet his legs doubled under him like that. It took him twenty minutes to get back to the edge of the plain, and when he got there it was empty. There was no sign of Quade or FitzHugh, or of Joanne and Marie; and there was no one coming from the direction of the mountain.

He tried to run again, and he found that over the level floor of the valley he could make faster time than among the rocks. He went to where he had dropped his rifle. It was gone. He searched for his automatic. That, too, was gone. There was one weapon left—a long skinning-knife in one of the panniers near the tepee. As he went for this, he passed two of the men whom he had shot. Quade and FitzHugh had taken their weapons, and had turned them over to see if they were alive or dead. They were dead. He secured the knife, and behind the tepee he passed the third body, its face as still and white as the others. He shuddered as he recognized it. It was Slim Barker. His rifle was gone.

More swiftly now he made his way into the break out of which his assailants had come a short time before. The thought came to him again that he had been right, and that Donald MacDonald, in spite of all his years in the mountains, had been fatally wrong. Their enemies had come down from the north, and this break led to their hiding-place. Through it Joanne must have been taken by her captors. As he made his way over the rocks, gain-

ing a little more of his strength with each step, his mind tried to picture the situation that had now arisen between Quade and Mortimer FitzHugh. How would Quade, who was mad for possession of Joanne, accept FitzHugh's claim of ownership? Would he believe his partner? Would he even believe Joanne if, to save herself from him, she told him FitzHugh was her husband? Even if he believed them, *would he give her up?* Would Quade allow Mortimer FitzHugh to stand between him and the object for which he was willing to sacrifice everything?

As Aldous asked himself these questions his blood ran hot and cold by turns. And the answer to them drew a deep breath of fear and of anguish from him as he tried again to run among the rocks. There could be but one answer: Quade would fight. He would fight like a madman, and if this fight had happened and FitzHugh had been killed Joanne had already gone utterly and helplessly into his power. He believed that FitzHugh had not revealed to Quade his relationship to Joanne while they were on the plain, and the thought still more terrible came to him that he might not reveal it at all, that he might repudiate Joanne even as she begged upon her knees for him to save her. What a revenge it would be to see her helpless and broken in the arms of Quade! And then, both being beasts——

He could think no farther. The sweat broke out on his face as he hobbled faster over a level space. The sound of the water between the chasm walls was now a thunder in his ears. He could not have heard a rifle-shot or a scream a hundred yards away. The trail he was following had continually grown narrower. It seemed to end a

little ahead of him, and the fear that he had come the wrong way after all filled him with dread. He came to the face of the mountain wall, and then, to his left, he saw a crack that was no wider than a man's body. In it there was sand, and the sand was beaten by footprints! He wormed his way through, and a moment later stood at the edge of the chasm. Fifty feet above him a natural bridge of rock spanned the huge cleft through which the stream was rushing. He crossed this, exposing himself openly to a shot if it was guarded. But it was not guarded. This fact convinced him that MacDonald had been killed, and that his enemies believed he was dead. If MacDonald had escaped, and they had feared a possible pursuit, some one would have watched the bridge.

The trail was easy to follow now. Sand and grassy earth had replaced rock and shale; he could make out the imprints of feet—many of them—and they led in the direction of a piece of timber that apparently edged a valley running to the east and west. The rumble of the torrent in the chasm grew fainter as he advanced. A couple of hundred yards farther on the trail swung to the left again; it took him around the end of a huge rock, and as he appeared from behind this, his knife clutched in his hand, he dropped suddenly flat on his face, and his heart rose like a lump in his throat. Scarcely fifty yards above him was the camp of his enemies! There were two tepees and piles of saddles and panniers and blankets about them, but not a soul that he could see. And then, suddenly, there rose a voice bellowing with rage, and he recognized it as Quade's. It came from beyond the tepee, and he rose quickly from where he had thrown himself and ran forward, with the

tepee between him and those on the other side. Close to the canvas he dropped on his knees and crawled out behind a pile of saddles and panniers. From here he could see.

So near that he could almost have touched them were Joanne and Marie, seated on the ground, with their backs toward him. Their hands were tied behind them. Their feet were bound with pannier ropes. A dozen paces beyond them were Quade and Mortimer FitzHugh.

The two men were facing each other, a yard apart. Mortimer FitzHugh's face was white, a deadly white, and he was smiling. His right hand rested carelessly in his hunting-coat pocket. There was a sneering challenge on his lips; in his eyes was a look that Aldous knew meant death if Quade moved. And Quade was like a great red beast ready to spring. His eyes seemed bulging out on his cheeks; his great hands were knotted; his shoulders were hunched forward, and his mottled face was ablaze with passion. In that moment's dramatic tableau Aldous glanced about swiftly. The men from the mountain had not returned. He was alone with Quade and Mortimer FitzHugh.

Then FitzHugh spoke, very quietly, a little laughingly; but his voice trembled, and Aldous knew what the hand was doing in the hunting-coat pocket.

"You're excited, Billy," he said. "I'm not a liar, as you've very impolitely told me. And I'm not playing you dirt, and I haven't fallen in love with the lady myself, as you seem to think. But she belongs to me, body and soul. If you don't believe me—why, ask the lady herself, Billy!"

As he spoke, he turned his sneering eyes for the fraction

of a second toward Joanne. The movement was fatal. Quade was upon him. The hand in the coat pocket flung itself upward, there followed a muffled report, but the bullet flew wide. In all his life Aldous had never heard a sound like the roar that came from Quade's throat then. He saw Mortimer FitzHugh's hand appear with a pistol in it, and then the pistol was gone. He did not see where it went to. He gripped his knife and waited, his heart beating with what seemed like smothered explosions as he watched for the opportunity which he knew would soon come. He expected to see FitzHugh go down under Quade's huge bulk. Instead of that, a small, iron fist shot upward and Quade's head went back as if broken from his neck.

FitzHugh sprang a step backward, and in the movement his heel caught the edge of a pack-saddle. He stumbled, almost fell, and before he could recover himself Quade was at him again. This time there was something in the red brute's hand. It rose and fell once—and Mortimer FitzHugh reeled backward with a moaning cry, swayed for a second or two on his feet, and fell to the ground. Quade turned. In his hand was a bloody knife. Madness and passion and the triumphant joy of a demon were in his face as he glared at his helpless prey. As Aldous crouched lower his shoulder touched one of the saddles. It slipped from the pile, one of the panniers followed it, and Quade saw him. There was no longer reason for concealment, and as Quade stood paralyzed for a moment Aldous sprang forth into the space between him and Joanne. He heard the cry that broke strangely from her lips but he did not turn his head. He advanced upon Quade,

his head lowered, the long skinning-knife gleaming in his hand.

John Aldous knew that words would avail nothing in these last few minutes between him and Quade. The latter had already hunched himself forward, the red knife in his hand poised at his waistline. He was terrible. His huge bulk, his red face and bull neck, his eyes popping from behind their fleshy lids, and the dripping blade in the shapeless hulk of his hand gave him the appearance as he stood there of some monstrous gargoyle instead of a thing of flesh and blood. And Aldous was terrible to look at, but in a way that wrung a moaning cry from Joanne. His face was livid from the beat of the rocks; it was crusted with blood; his eyes were partly closed, and what remained of his shirt was drenched with blood that still ran from the deep cuts in his arms and shoulders. But it was he who advanced, and Quade who stood and waited.

Aldous knew little or nothing of knife-fighting; and he realized, also, that there was a strange weakness in his arms and body caused by his battle with the maelstroms in the chasm. But he had wrestled a great deal with the Indians of the north, who fought as their half-wolf sledge-dogs fought, and he employed their methods now. Slowly and deliberately he began to circle around Quade, so that Quade became the pivot of that circle, and as he circled he drew nearer and nearer to his enemy, but never in a frontal advance. He edged inward, with his knife-arm on the outside. His deadly deliberateness and the steady glare of his eyes discomfited Quade, who suddenly took a step backward.

It was always when the Indian made this step that his opponent darted in; and Aldous, with this in mind, sprang to the attack. Their knives clashed in midair. As they met, hilt to hilt, Aldous threw his whole weight against Quade, darted sidewise, and with a terrific lunge brought the blade of his knife down between Quade's shoulders. A straight blade would have gone from back to chest through muscle and sinew, but the knife which Aldous held scarcely pierced the other's clothes.

Not until then did he fully realize the tremendous odds against him. The curved blade of his skinning-knife would not penetrate! His one hope was to cut with it. He flung out his arm before Quade had fully recovered, and blind luck carried the keen edge of the knife across his enemy's pouchy cheek. The blood came in a spurt, and with a terrible cry Quade leaped back toward the pile of saddles and panniers. Before Aldous could follow his advantage the other had dropped his knife and had snatched up a four-foot length of a tepee pole. For a moment he hesitated while the blood ran in a hot flood down his thick neck. Then with a bellow of rage he rushed upon Aldous.

It was no time for knife-work now. As the avalanche of brute strength descended upon him Aldous gathered himself for the shock. He had already measured his own weakness. Those ten minutes among the rocks of the chasm had broken and beaten him until his strength was gone. He was panting from his first onset with Quade, but his brain was working. And he knew that Quade was no longer a reasoning thing. He had ceased to think. He was blind with the passion of the brute, and his one

thought was to crush his enemy down under the weight of the club in his huge hands. Aldous waited. He heard Joanne's terrified scream when Quade was almost upon him—when less than five feet separated them. The club was descending when he flung himself forward, straight for the other's feet. The club crashed over him, and with what strength he had he gripped Quade at the knees. With a tremendous thud Quade came to earth. The club broke from the grip of his hands. For a moment he was stunned, and in that moment Aldous was at his throat.

He would have sold the best of his life for the skinning-knife. But he had lost it in gripping Quade. And now he choked—with every ounce of strength in him he choked at the thick red neck of his enemy. Quade's hands reached for his own throat. They found it. And both choked, lying there gasping and covered with blood, while Joanne struggled vainly to free herself, and scream after scream rang from her lips. And John Aldous knew that at last the end had come. For there was no longer strength in his arms, and there was something that was like a strange cramp in his fingers, while the clutch at his own throat was turning the world black. His grip relaxed. His hands fell limp. The last that he realized was that Quade was over him, and that he must be dying.

Then it was, as he lay within a final second or two of death, no longer conscious of physical attack or of Joanne's terrible cries, that a strange and unforeseen thing occurred. Beyond the tepee a man had risen from the earth. He staggered toward them, and it was from Marie that the wildest and strangest cry of all came now. For the man was Joe DeBar! In his hand he held a knife. Swaying

and stumbling he came to the fighters—from behind. Quade did not see him, and over Quade's huge back he poised himself. The knife rose; for the fraction of a second it trembled in midair. Then it descended, and eight inches of steel went to the heart of Quade.

And as DeBar turned and staggered toward Joanne and Marie, John Aldous was sinking deeper and deeper into a black and abysmal night.

CHAPTER XXX

IN THAT chaotic night in which he was drifting, light as a feather floating on the wind, John Aldous experienced neither pain nor very much of the sense of life. And yet, without seeing or feeling, he seemed to be living. All was dead in him but that last consciousness, which is almost the spirit; he might have been dreaming, and minutes, hours, or even years might have passed in that dream. For a long time he seemed to be sinking through the blackness; and then something stopped him, without jar or shock, and he was rising. He could hear nothing. There was a vast silence about him, a silence as deep and as unbroken as the abysmal pit in which he seemed to be softly floating.

After a time Aldous felt himself swaying and rocking, as though tossed gently on the billows of a sea. This was the first thought that took shape in his struggling brain—he was at sea; he was on a ship in the heart of a black night, and he was alone. He tried to call out, but his tongue seemed gone. It seemed a very long time before day broke, and then it was a strange day. Little needles of light pricked his eyes; silver strings shot like flashes of weblike lightning through the darkness, and after that he saw for an instant a strange glare. It was gone in one big, powderlike flash, and he was in night again. These days and nights seemed to follow one an-

other swiftly now, and the nights grew less dark, and the days brighter. He was conscious of sounds and buffetings, and it was very hot.

Out of this heat there came a cool, soft breeze that was continually caressing his face, and eyes, and head. It was like the touch of a spirit hand. It became more and more real to him. It caressed him into a dark and comfortable oblivion. Out of this oblivion a still brighter day roused him. His brain seemed clear. He opened his eyes. A white cloud was hovering over them; it fell softly; it was cool and gentle. Then it rose again, and it was not a cloud, but a hand! The hand moved away, and he was looking into a pair of wide-open, staring, prayerful eyes, and a little cry came to him, and a voice.

"John—John——"

He was drifting again, but now he knew that he was alive. He heard movement. He heard voices. They were growing nearer and more distinct. He tried to cry out Joanne's name, and it came in a whispering breath between his lips. But Joanne heard; and he heard her calling to him; he felt her hands; she was imploring him to open his eyes, to speak to her. It seemed many minutes before he could do this, but at last he succeeded. And this time his vision was not so blurred. He could see plainly. Joanne was there, hovering over him, and just beyond her was the great bearded face of Donald MacDonald. And then, before words had formed on his lips, he did a wonderful thing. He smiled.

"O my God, I thank Thee!" he heard Joanne cry out, and then she was on her knees, and her face was against his, and she was sobbing.

He knew that it was MacDonald who drew her away. The great head bent over him.

"Take this, will 'ee, Johnny boy?"

Aldous stared.

"Mac, you're—alive," he breathed.

"Alive as ever was, Johnny. Take this."

He swallowed. And then Joanne hovered over him again, and he put up his hands to her face, and her glorious eyes were swimming seas as she kissed him and choked back the sobs in her throat. He buried his fingers in her hair. He held her head close to him, and for many minutes no one spoke, while MacDonald stood and looked down on them. In those minutes everything returned to him. The fight was over. MacDonald had come in time to save him from Quade. But—and now his eyes stared upward through the sheen of Joanne's hair—he was in a cabin! He recognized it. It was Donald MacDonald's old home. When Joanne raised her head he looked about him without speaking. He was in the wide bunk built against the wall. Sunlight was filtering through a white curtain at the window, and in the open door he saw the anxious face of Marie.

He tried to lift himself, and was amazed to find that he could not. Very gently Joanne urged him back on his pillow. Her face was a glory of life and of joy. He obeyed her as he would have obeyed the hand of the Madonna. She saw all his questioning.

"You must be quiet, John," she said, and never had he heard in her voice the sweetness of love that was in it now. "We will tell you everything—Donald and I. But you must be quiet. You were terribly beaten among the rocks

We brought you here at noon, and the sun is setting—and until now you have not opened your eyes. Everything is well. But you must be quiet. You were terribly bruised by the rocks, dear."

It was sweet to lie under the caresses of her hand. He drew her face down to him.

"Joanne, my darling, you understand now—why I wanted to come alone into the North?"

Her lips pressed warm and soft against his.

"I know," she whispered, and he could feel her arms trembling, and her breath coming quickly. Gently she drew away from him. "I am going to make you some broth," she said then.

He watched her as she went out of the cabin, one white hand lifted to her throat.

Old Donald MacDonald seated himself on the edge of the bunk. He looked down at Aldous, chuckling in his beard; and Aldous, with his bruised and swollen face and half-open eyes, grinned like a happy fiend.

"It was a wunerful, wunerful fight, Johnny!" said old Donald.

"It was, Mac. And you came in fine on the home stretch!"

"What d'ye mean—home stretch?" queried Donald leaning over.

"You saved me from Quade."

Donald fairly groaned.

"I didn't, Johnny—I didn't! DeBar killed 'im. It was all over when I come. On'y—Johnny—I had a most cur'ous word with Culver Rann afore he died!"

In his eagerness Aldous was again trying to sit up when

Joanne appeared in the doorway. With a little cry she darted to him, forced him gently back, and brushed old Donald off the edge of the bunk.

"Go out and watch the broth, Donald," she commanded firmly. Then she said to Aldous, stroking back his hair, "I forbade you to talk. John, dear, aren't you going to mind me?"

"Did Quade get me with the knife?" he asked.

"No, no."

"Am I shot?"

"No, dear."

"Any bones broken?"

"Donald says not."

"Then please give me my pipe, Joanne—and let me get up. Why do you want me to lie here when I'm strong like an ox, as Donald says?"

Joanne laughed happily.

"You *are* getting better every minute," she cried joyously. "But you were terribly beaten by the rocks, John. If you will wait until you have the broth I will let you sit up."

A few minutes later, when he had swallowed his broth, Joanne kept her promise. Only then did he realize that there was not a bone or a muscle in his body that did not have its own particular ache. He grimaced when Joanne and Donald bolstered him up with blankets at his back. But he was happy. Twilight was coming swiftly, and as Joanne gave the final pats and turns to the blankets and pillows, MacDonald was lighting half a dozen candles placed around the room.

"Any watch to-night, Donald?" asked Aldous.

"No, Johnny, there ain't no watch to-night," replied the old mountaineer.

He came and seated himself on a bench with Joanne. For half an hour after that Aldous listened to a recital of the strange things that had happened—how poor marksmanship had saved MacDonald on the mountainside, and how at last the duel had ended with the old hunter killing those who had come to slay him. When they came to speak of DeBar, Joanne leaned nearer to Aldous.

"It is wonderful what love will sometimes do," she spoke softly. "In the last few hours Marie has bared her soul to me, John. What she has been she has not tried to hide from me, nor even from the man she loves. She was one of Mortimer FitzHugh's tools. DeBar saw her and loved her, and she sold herself to him in exchange for the secret of the gold. When they came into the North the wonderful thing happened. She loved DeBar—not in the way of her kind, but as a woman in whom had been born a new heart and a new soul and a new joy. She defied FitzHugh; she told DeBar how she had tricked him.

"This morning FitzHugh attempted his old familiarity with her, and DeBar struck him down. The act gave them excuse for what they had planned to do. Before her eyes Marie thought they had killed the man she loved. She flung herself on his breast, and she said she could not feel his heart beat, and his blood flowed warm against her hands and face. Both she and DeBar had determined to warn us if they could. Only a few minutes before DeBar was stabbed he had let off his rifle—an accident, he

said. But it was not an accident. It was the shot Donald heard in the cavern. It saved us, John! And Marie, waiting her opportunity, fled to us in the plain. DeBar was not killed. He says my screams brought him back to life. He came out—and killed Quade with a knife. Then he fell at our feet. A few minutes later Donald came. DeBar is in another cabin. He is not fatally hurt, and Marie is happy."

She was stroking his hand when she finished. The curious rumbling came softly in MacDonald's beard and his eyes were bright with a whimsical humour.

"I pretty near bored a hole through poor Joe when I come up," he chuckled. "But you bet I hugged him when I found what he'd done, Johnny! Joe says their camp was just over the range from us that night FitzHugh looked us up, an' Joanne thought she'd been dreamin'. He didn't have any help, but his intention was to finish us alone—murder us asleep—when Joanne cried out. Joe says it was just a devil's freak that took 'im to the top of the mountain alone that night. He saw our fire an' came down to investigate."

A low voice was calling outside the door. It was Marie. As Joanne went to her a quick gleam came into old Donald's eyes. He looked behind him cautiously to see that she had disappeared, then he bent over Aldous, and whispered hoarsely:

"Johnny, I had a most cur'ous word with Rann—or FitzHugh—afore he died! He wasn't dead when I went to him. But he knew he was dyin'; an' Johnny, he was smilin' an' cool to the end. I wanted to ask 'im a question, Johnny. I was dead cur'ous to know *why the grave were*

empty! But he asked for Joanne, an' I couldn't break in on his last breath. I brought her. The first thing he asked her was how people had took it when they found out he'd poisoned his father! When Joanne told him no one had ever thought he'd killed his father, FitzHugh sat leanin' against the saddles for a minit so white an' still I thought he 'ad died with his eyes open. Then it came out, Johnny. He was smilin' as he told it. He killed his father with poison to get his money. Later he came to America. He didn't have time to tell us how he come to think they'd discovered his crime. He was dyin' as he talked. It came out sort o' slobberingly, Johnny. He thought they'd found 'im out. He changed his name, an' sent out the report that Mortimer FitzHugh had died in the mount'ins. But Johnny, he died afore I could ask him about the grave!"

There was a final note of disappointment in old Donald's voice that was almost pathetic.

"It was such a cur'ous grave," he said. "An' the clothes were laid out so prim an' nice."

Aldous laid his hand on MacDonald's.

"It's easy, Mac," he said, and he wanted to laugh at the disappointment that was still in the other's face. "Don't you see? He never expected any one to dig *into* the grave. And he put the clothes and the watch and the ring in there to get rid of them. They might have revealed his identity. Why, Donald——"

Joanne was coming to them again. She laid a cool hand on his forehead and held up a warning finger to MacDonald.

"Hush!" she said gently. "Your head is very hot,

dear, and there must be no more talking. You must lie down and sleep. Tell John good-night, Donald!"

Like a boy MacDonald did as she told him, and disappeared through the cabin door. Joanne levelled the pillows and lowered John's head.

"I can't sleep, Joanne," he protested.

"I will sit here close at your side and stroke your face and hair," she said gently.

"And you will talk to me?"

"No, I must not talk. But, John——"

"Yes, dear."

"If you will promise to be very, very quiet, and let me be very quiet——"

"Yes."

"I will make you a pillow of my hair."

"I—will be quiet," he whispered.

She unbound her hair, and leaned over so that it fell in a flood on his pillow. With a sigh of contentment he buried his face in the rich, sweet masses of it. Gently, like the cooling breeze that had come to him in his hours of darkness, her hand caressed him. He closed his eyes; he drank in the intoxicating perfume of her tresses; and after a little he slept.

For many hours Joanne sat at his bedside, sleepless, and rejoicing.

When Aldous awoke it was dawn in the cabin. Joanne was gone. For a few minutes he continued to lie with his face toward the window. He knew that he had slept a long time, and that the day was breaking. Slowly he raised himself. The terrible ache in his body was gone; he was still lame, but no longer helpless. He drew himself

cautiously to the edge of the bunk and sat there for a time, testing himself before he got up. He was delighted at the result of the experiments. He rose to his feet. His clothes were hanging against the wall, and he dressed himself. Then he opened the door and walked out into the morning, limping a little as he went. MacDonald was up. Joanne's tepee was close to the cabin. The two men greeted each other quietly, and they talked in low voices, but Joanne heard them, and a few moments later she ran out with her hair streaming about her and went straight into the arms of John Aldous.

This was the beginning of the three wonderful days that yet remained for Joanne and John Aldous in Donald MacDonald's little valley of gold and sunshine and blue skies. They were strange and beautiful days, filled with a great peace and a great happiness, and in them wonderful changes were at work. On the second day Joanne and Marie rode alone to the cavern where Jane lay, and when they returned in the golden sun of the afternoon they were leading their horses, and walking hand in hand. And when they came down to where DeBar and Aldous and Donald MacDonald were testing the richness of the black sand along the stream there was a light in Marie's eyes and a radiance in Joanne's face which told again that world-old story of a Mary Magdalene and the dawn of another Day. And now, Aldous thought, Marie had become beautiful; and Joanne laughed softly and happily that night, and confided many things into the ears of Aldous, while Marie and DeBar talked for a long time alone out under the stars, and came back at last hand in hand, like two children. Before they went to bed Marie

whispered something to Joanne, and a little later Joanne whispered it to Aldous.

"They want to know if they can be married with us, John," she said. "That is, if you haven't grown tired of trying to marry me, dear," she added with a happy laugh. "Have you?"

His answer satisfied her. And when she told a small part of it to Marie, the other woman's dark eyes grew as soft as the night, and she whispered the words to Joe.

The third and last day was the most beautiful of all. Joe's knife wound was not bad. He had suffered most from a blow on the head. Both he and Aldous were in condition to travel, and plans were made to begin the homeward journey on the fourth morning. MacDonald had unearthed another dozen sacks of the hidden gold, and he explained to Aldous what must be done to secure legal possession of the little valley. His manner of doing this was unnatural and strained. His words came haltingly. There was unhappiness in his eyes. It was in his voice. It was in the odd droop of his shoulders. And finally, when they were alone, he said to Aldous, with almost a sob in his voice:

"Johnny—Johnny, if on'y the gold were not here!"

He turned his eyes to the mountain, and Aldous took one of his big gnarled hands in both his own.

"Say it, Mac," he said gently. "I guess I know what it is."

"It ain't fair to you, Johnny," said old Donald, still with his eyes on the mountains. "It ain't fair to you. But when you take out the claims down there it'll start a

rush. You know what it means, Johnny. There'll be a thousand men up here; an' mebby you can't understand —but there's the cavern an' Jane an' the little cabin here; an' it seems like desecratin' *her*."

His voice choked, and as Aldous gripped the big hand harder in his own he laughed.

"It would, Mac," he said. "I've been watching you while we made the plans. These cabins and the gold have been here for more than forty years without discovery, Donald—and they won't be discovered again so long as Joe DeBar and John Aldous and Donald MacDonald have a word to say about it. We'll take out no claims, Mac. The valley isn't ours. It's Jane's valley and yours!"

Joanne, coming up just then, wondered what the two men had been saying that they stood as they did, with hands clasped. Aldous told her. And then old Donald confessed to them what was in his mind, and what he had kept from them. At last he had found his home, and he was not going to leave it again. He was going to stay with Jane. He was going to bring her from the cavern and bury her near the cabin, and he pointed out the spot, covered with wild hyacinths and asters, where she used to sit on the edge of the stream and watch him while he worked for gold. And they could return each year and dig for gold, and he would dig for gold while they were away, and they could have it all. All that he wanted was enough to eat, and Jane, and the little valley. And Joanne turned from him as he talked, her face streaming with tears, and in John's throat was a great lump, and he looked away from MacDonald to the mountains.

So it came to pass that on the fourth morning, when they went into the south, they stopped on the last knoll that shut out the little valley from the larger valley, and looked back. And Donald MacDonald stood alone in front of the cabin waving them good-bye.

THE END

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